AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル 7

著●川上稔
イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

電撃文庫

終わりのクロニクル

著●川上 稔　イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

7

—Everyone.
It is time to go
So that we may begin ourselves

The Ending Chronicle

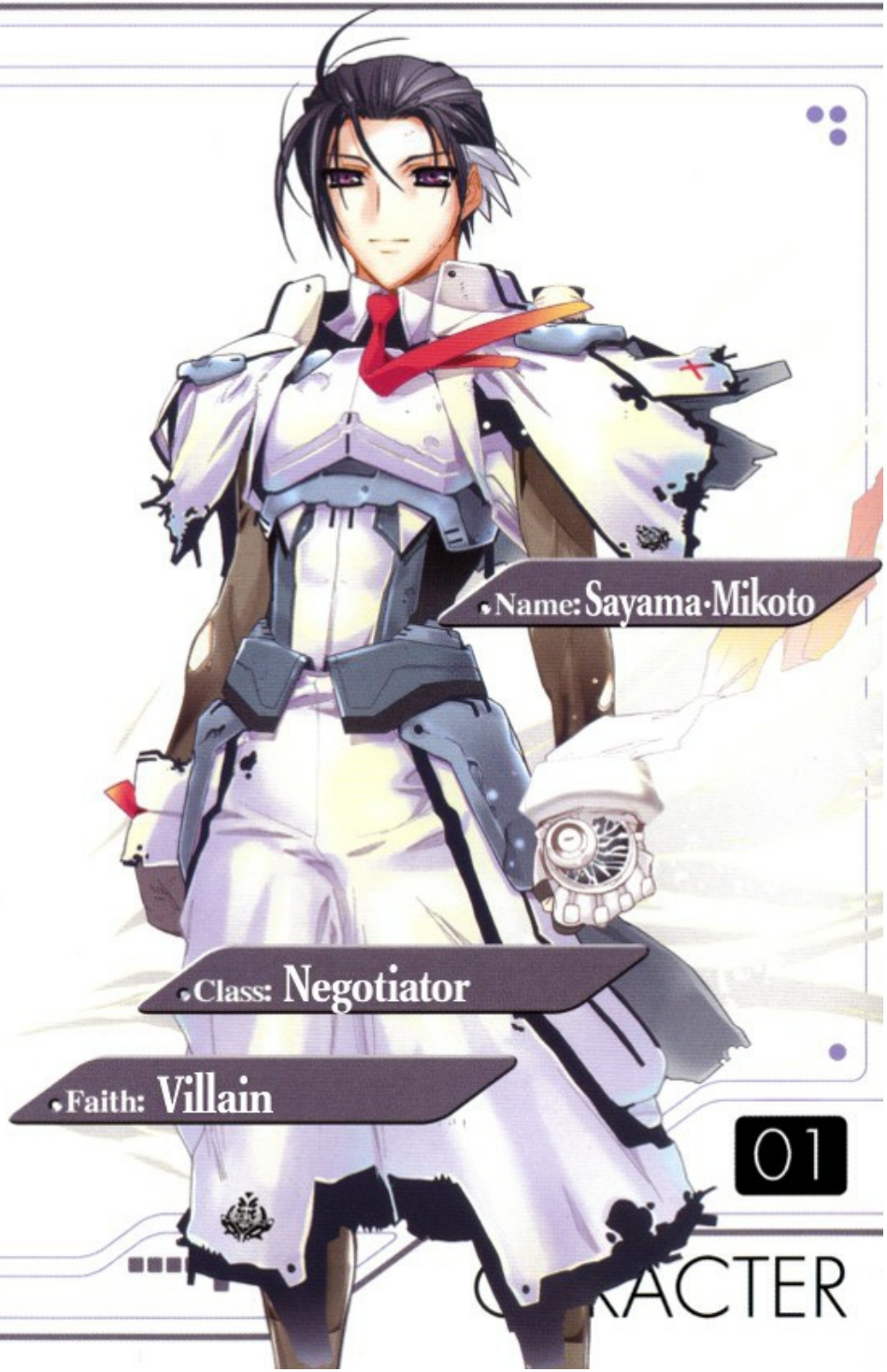
Act.07

02

Name: Shinjou·Sadagiri

Class: Gunner

Faith: Villain's Opposite



Name: Sayama·Mikoto

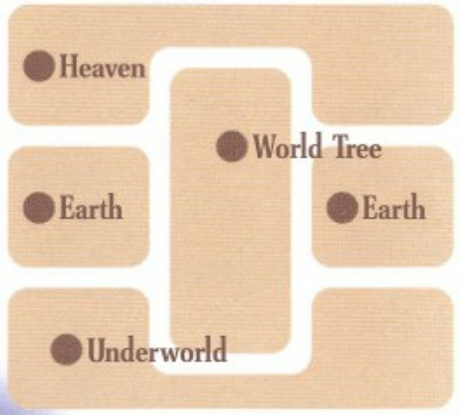
Class: Negotiator

Faith: Villain

01

04

The world's eventual destruction had been prophesied and the gods attempted to strengthen their rule by securing the Concept Core. However, the weapon containing the Concept Core was stolen by an underground organization and 10th-Gear's destruction began.



Name: Baku

About 10th-Gear

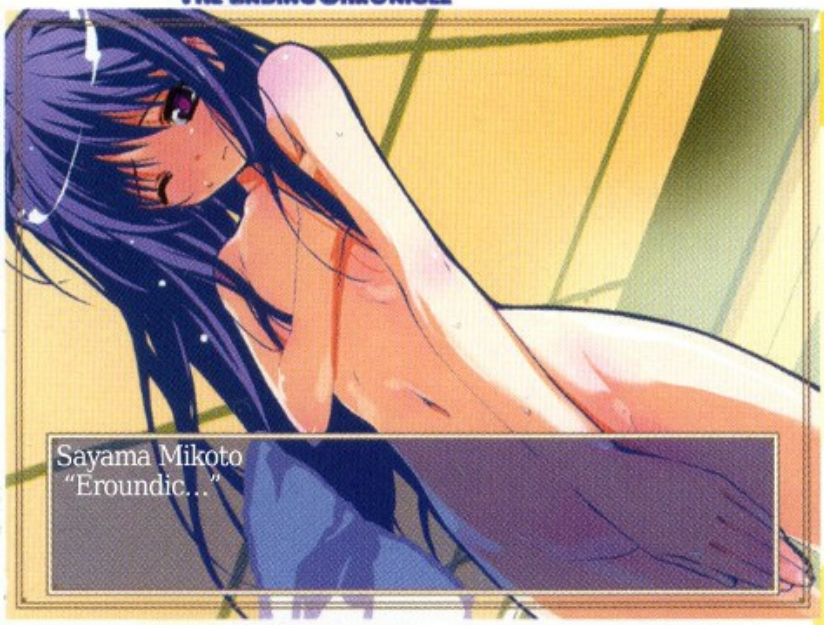
10th-Gear was a layered world in which a heavenly world, an earthly world, and an underworld were supported by a world tree. Heaven and earth were connected, but the underworld belonged to the sinful dead and the giants.

Name: Sayama·Yume

NEW PRODUCT

OWARO
THE ENDING CHRONICLE
SE-CHAN AND SA-CHAN

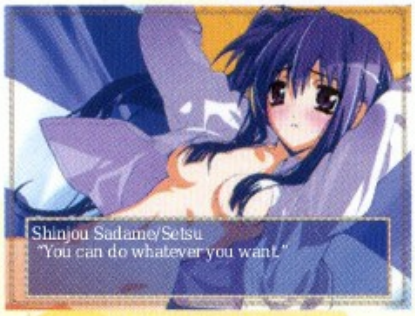
Supports – Shinjows XP
Device – Game Gear

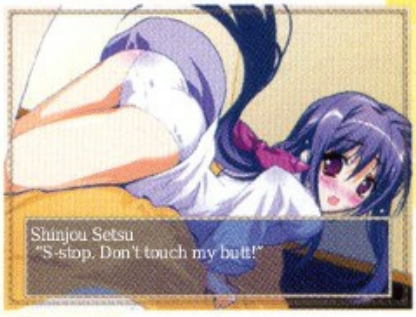


● IF ANYTHING LOOKS SUSPICIOUS, MAKE SURE TO INVESTIGATE!

● MOVEMENT IS HANDLED WITH A CONFUSING MAP SYSTEM.

EVERYONE'S BELOVED SE-CHAN AND SA-CHAN ARE FINALLY THE STARS OF THEIR OWN GAME IN THIS DREAM! YES, A DREAM!
IN THE MAIN STORY, THE PROTAGONIST PURSUED THEIR SECRET AND ENDED UP BRINGING THE WORLD TOGETHER IN THE PROCESS, SO ALL OF YOU NEED TO GIVE IT YOUR BEST SHOT, TOO!

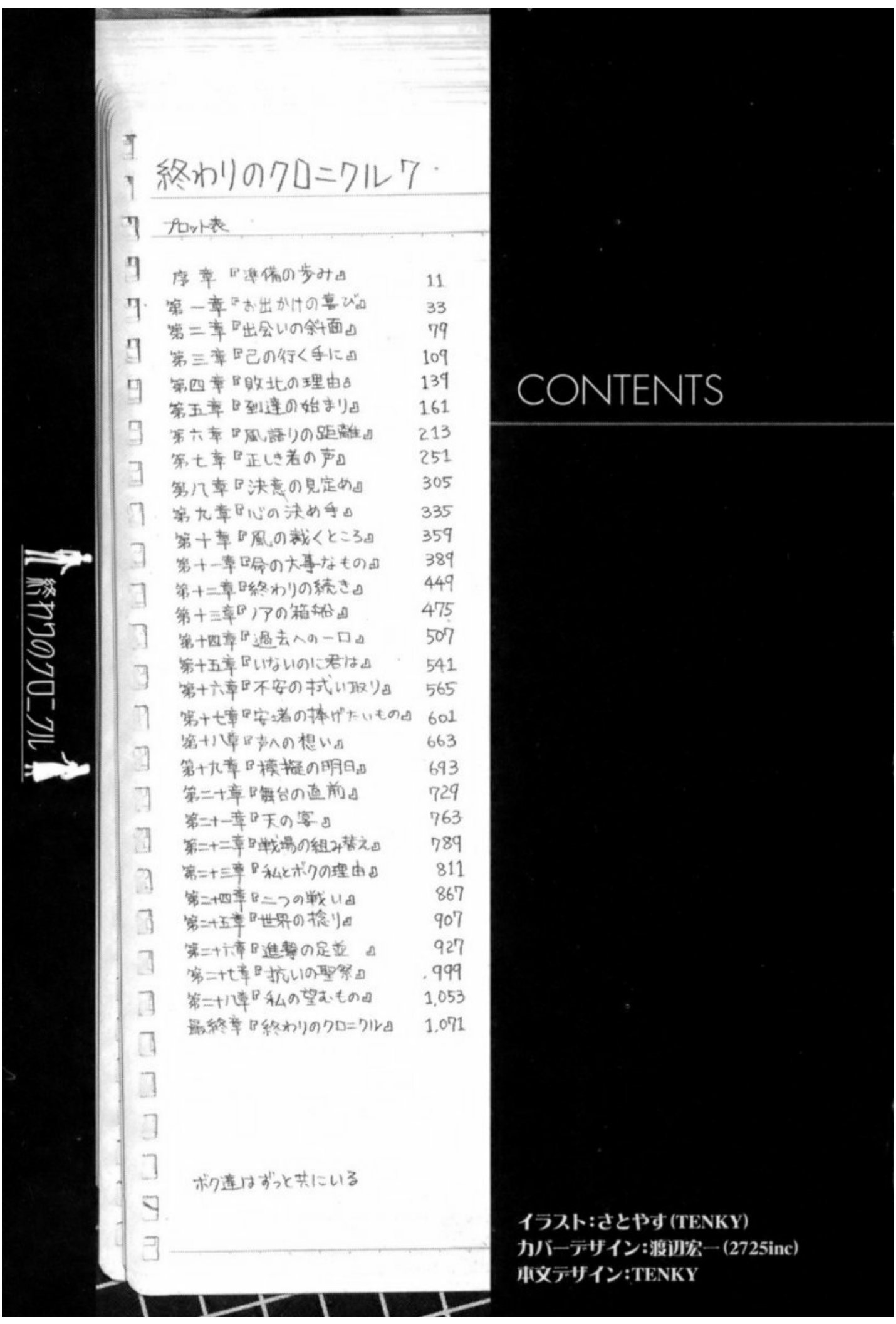




● SA-CHAN OFTEN SAYS AND DOES WHATEVER COMES TO MIND.

● SE-CHAN TENDS TO NOT THINK ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES.

*SCREENSHOTS ARE STILL UNDER IMAGINARY DEVELOPMENT.



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イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）
カバーデザイン：渡辺宏一（2725inc）
本文デザイン：TENKY

05

・現状における佐山中心人物相関図・

家族関係

- 田宮家 — 実家代わり
- 佐山・浅犠 — 佐山の亡父
- 佐山・諭命 — 佐山の亡母

新庄の両親

- 新庄・由起緒
- 新庄・由起夫

元護国課

- 佐山・薫 — 養父
- ジークフリート — 図書館司書
- 新庄・要 — 新庄の肉親?
- アブラム — 実働部部長
- 趙・晴 — 若作り
- 大城・宏昌 — 技術者
- サンダーソン — 機竜乗り
- 飛場・竜徹 — 道場主

Top-G

- ハジ
- 戸田・命刻
- 田宮・詩乃
- 長田・竜美
- アレックス

佐山・御言

新庄・運／切 — 不断の存在

生徒会関係

- 大樹先生 — 担当・顧問

出雲・覚 — 会長

風見・千里 — 会計

ダン・原川 — ニヒラー少年

飛場・竜司 — ややエロ

UCAT関係

- 大城・至 — 監督
- Sf — 至の侍女
- シビュレ — 整備役
- ボルドマン — 連携役
- 大城・一夫 — 困った老人

1st-G

- ブレンヒルト — 美術部部長
- ディアナ — 独逸UCAT

2nd-G

- 鹿島・昭緒 — 2nd-Gの軍神
- 月読・史弦 — 開発部部長

ヒオ・T — おろおろ娘

美影 — 自動人形?

Prologue

“Step Toward Preparation”

Always
Always
One walks in order to gain something

●

During the night, everything but the moon and stars seemed to sink.

And those lights in the night sky illuminated the many things sinking into the earth.

The light first displayed the mountains which rose up from the earth. The shadows of the mountaintops led to shadows of trees as the forests on the slopes were revealed.

The vast mountainous region was made up of those tree-covered rooftops awash with pale light and the gatherings of shadow down below.

A part of this mountainous region formed a plain.

It was a large and flat expanse of land.

It had a radius of about two kilometers, it was surrounded by forest, and it was covered by underbrush that had died down for winter.

Exposed to the wind and rain and covered in gravel, the ground currently displayed a few points of color.

The colors were red lights that appeared much weaker than the lights shining down from the sky.

The ember-like scarlet lights came from heated metal.

The metal was hot wreckage.

And the countless pieces of burning metal illuminated something from below: people standing or collapsed among the wreckage.

A battle had taken place.

The collapsed defeated wore white armored uniforms and they were all injured and unmoving.

The standing victors wore black armored uniforms and…

“It seems we’ve opened the way.”

A mechanical voice spoke and a large form walked through as if parting the wreckage.

What looked like a small mountain was actually a forty meter dragon made of machine parts.

The mechanical dragon carried a large container on his back and he looked to the standing people.

“Restrain the UCAT guards and carry them into the forest on the side. Maintenance team, you work on me and on Tatsumi’s Typhon. I need my Justice Armor Lv. 9 attached.”

“It’s just normal armor, so stop calling it that, Alex.”

That comment came from the darkness directly above.

A white giant descended while carrying a large container overhead.

The moonlight washed over the ten-meter six-winged god of war covered in white armor.

A long-haired girl, Tatsumi, stood on the god of war’s shoulder and she continued speaking as the giant silently landed.

“Enemy reinforcements were coming from below, so I silenced them on my way here. This will probably develop into a battlefield with long lines soon, so we need to get these Concept Core containers inside quickly.”

Tatsumi looked forward into the vast expanse of the sky.

Everyone could see a massively tall shadow that seemed to rise endlessly into the night sky.

It was so faint they had to strain their eyes to see it and it looked like a great wall filling the entire plain, but it never seemed to end no matter how high they craned their necks.

It seemed to extend to the farthest reaches of the heavens.

“Babel.”

Tatsumi spoke the name of a tower of words from a certain mythology, but she immediately shook her head.

“No, this is Noah piercing into the earth. This is the massive aerial ship that you and I lived and played on.”

“In that case, we should be allowed inside. And…”

They all looked in the opposite direction.

A girl stood all alone among the wreckage as if following the others.

She held something wrapped in a blanket.

Someone called out to her: Are you okay?

So she replied with a small nod: I am fine.

Her voice was dry, her face was pale, and her disheveled hair swayed.

“I am fine. Keep going. We have lost something, but that is why we must take it back.”

She embraced the blanket in her arms.

“Let us create a concept that rejects death.”

Tatsumi nodded at that.

“About three hours have passed since we lost Shino, but you know what to do, don’t you, Mikoku?”

“Yes. Noah is most likely active on the inside. It needs some level of power to maintain the exterior that supports its great form. And if that power is there, then Noah is still active. It is the same as when Top-Gear was destroyed.”

So…

“The concept creation facility failed in Top-Gear, but with Low-Gear’s contradiction allowance concept, I can use it to create a philosopher’s stone.”

“How will you do it?” asked Tatsumi.

Mikoku answered while looking down at her chest.

“I will have Noah’s concept creation facility scan my philosopher’s stone. And based on that, I will use all of Noah’s negative concepts and all of the positive concepts we took to create a concept under the optimal conditions,” she said. “I will create a resurrection concept, seal it in a philosopher’s stone, and embed it inside Shino. …Then I will mass produce the stones, remove all destruction from this world, and try to live alongside all of the concepts.”

“Then what if you didn’t seal the concept in a philosopher’s stone and instead released it so it took root in Low-Gear itself?” asked Tatsumi.

Mikoku shook her head.

“That is no different from recreating this world. If the concepts are completely different, the parent string vibration will change too much and everything living in this world will be destroyed and then remade.”

“I see. It’s true you and Shino couldn’t be together that way.”

“Yes,” said Mikoku as she began to walk.

She treaded on the gravel, walked on the metal fragments, and stepped over the scattering embers.

She joined the others who stood waiting for her, but then she continued forward.

“Why did all of you follow me? Hajji is not here and this is my own selfish desire.”

She looked across them all as she walked and they briefly hesitated to answer her.

But then one man lowered his bulletproof helmet and spoke with a self-deprecating smile on the corner of his mouth.

“This didn’t seem like too bad an idea if we can bring Shino back to life.”

Mikoku did not stop walking, but she did close her eyes for a moment.

“Thank you.”

A few of them lowered their heads at that and Mikoku said something more while still moving forward.

“Tatsumi, Alex. Please take the Concept Cores into Noah. And once you do that, finish your maintenance and head out with the others to intercept the enemy. The enemy is sure to come.”

“Will they really?”

“They will,” replied Mikoku. “After all, we are their enemy.”

She tightly held the weight in her arms and took another step toward the shadow standing tall in the darkness.

“There is no way they will not come. Team Leviathan Road are the only ones who can oppose us.”

But one of the others asked something more.

“Can we really pull this off if the enemy is coming? To produce a philosopher’s stone containing a new concept, we have to get Noah up and running, not to mention getting inside in the first place.”

He sounded worried, but Mikoku nodded.

“Do not worry. If Babel truly is Noah, then there is nothing to worry about. When we lived in Noah, it had…”

She faced forward.

“It had an automaton that managed the entire ship. The Shinjou couple created that control terminal and she would often play with us. If she is awake…”

Mikoku trailed off and came to a stop.

Directly ahead, a white figure stood in direct contrast to the black tower behind it.

It was an automaton.

It was a female model, but her design had a large difference from 3rd's automatons.

She had wings.

Mikoku saw a doll in a maid uniform with twelve mechanical white wings.

"Noah, so you are awake."

The winged automaton leaned forward in a bow.

"Testament."

The voice did not come from the automaton. It instead came from the great tower behind her.

And after she straightened up and looked into the sky, she faced the approaching people.

"I am 8th Arch-Model Automaton No. 0 of Concept Creation Aerial Ship SSS-X0 Noah. I entered standby for reactivation ten years ago and today stored all data and reactivated. I have been waiting. As a conscious terminal, I will handle all control of Noah. Over."

She took a breath.

"As before, please call me Noah, guides of the new world. Over."

●

In a large space, asphalt extended for about three thousand meters from east to west.

It was a runway.

It had a simple control tower and hangar to the west, but it was otherwise surrounded by forest.

A transport helicopter was stopped on the pavement in front of the hangar.

It was idling and its lights revealed several people around it.

Among them, a girl swung a spear around.

She wore a white armored uniform and she kept grabbing different spears from a hanger that resembled an umbrella stand, but she looked displeased as she swung one of the long spears around in one hand.

"Hey, Sibyl? Don't you have any heavier ones?"

Sibyl, who wore a white combat coat, responded with her blonde hair fluttering in the wind.

"I am not sure how to say this, Chisato-sama, but to be blunt, no one in UCAT can wield a spear heavier than that."

Hearing that, Kazami stopped easily swinging the spear around.

"It's that heavy?" she wondered while an old man in a lab coat tried to pick up one of the lighter looking spears in the hanger.

"Now, then. It's time for Kazuo to show off just how- nwohhhh! Oh! Oh!?

Ohhhhh!?”

Unable to fully lift it, Ooshiro collapsed backwards with his arms wrapped around the spear.

Pinned by the weapon, he flailed his legs around like a bug.

“Ah, no, it’s so heavy. And the tip is digging into the bottom of my body’s centerline! It’s a spear tip fantasy!”

Kazami spun her spear around and tapped the top of the spear tip in question.

After a long metallic tone, Ooshiro vibrated like a tuning fork and passed out.

When they saw the motionless old man’s limbs sticking up toward the heavens, all of the men shrieked and backed away.

However, Kazami looked down at the spear in her head.

“Ooshiro-san doesn’t matter, but why does this feel so light?”

“Yes, UCAT Director Ooshiro does not matter and it is possible G-Sp2 has given you some divine protection along those lines.”

“Even though G-Sp2 was kidnapped?” asked Kazami.

Sibyl smiled a little.

“Izumo-sama has his own divine protection from his mother.”

Kazami thought for a moment and then scratched her head.

…So that’s it.

“So the reason I’ve been sending people flying lately isn’t because I trained too much and gained dramatic levels of superhuman strength? It’s all because of some divine protection? …Hm, that’s a huge load off my mind. Right?”

For some reason, Sibyl averted her gaze and began admiring the weeds growing up between the cracks in the asphalt.

“Heh heh heh. Life is so very important. Even a few plants that can’t grow flowers have half a soul, don’t they?”

…Did I really say anything worth avoiding reality over?

At any rate, Kazami looked toward the idling helicopter where Izumo was.

He would have gotten a large sword to use instead of V-Sw.

If she really had been given some divine protection by G-Sp2, then she might feel closer to him and his defensive divine protection.

With that sense of intimacy tickling at her, she turned to face him.

“Hey, Kaku, what do you think?”

“Eh?”

He was sitting on the edge of the helicopter’s loading entrance, but he nodded and placed a hand behind his back.

“Yeah, I think ramen would be great tonight.”

“You weren’t even listening and what are you hiding behind your back?”

“Calm down, Chisato. And think carefully. Thanks to the current state of Japanese UCAT, this helicopter was sent from American UCAT , so what do you think I found inside?”

After giving it an instant of careful thought, she threw her spear toward the helicopter.

Sounds of impact, destruction, and screeching metal rang out while people fled and screamed, but Kazami had already turned back toward Sibyl.

She shrugged and grabbed a new spear.

“Honestly, no one here takes anything seriously.”

That was when Ooshiro spoke up while still on the ground.

“K-Kazami-kun! I think you’re the most naturally destructive person here! C-can’t you be a little kinder to your elders?”

She decided she could not, so she used her spear to tap the one Ooshiro held and everyone backed away again once he fell silent.

“U-um, Chisato-sama?” said Sibyl with a troubled look. “I feel like you are causing a minor rift between comrades.”

“Listen, Sibyl. Let me teach you a nice magic spell: It’s always like this.”

“I see,” said Sibyl.

Kazami tilted her head.

“Well, let’s go attach an anchor to this spear. No, two.”

“Two of them?”

…Did I say something wrong?

“W-well, I’m just in the mood for that. Think of them as weighty decorations. And, um…to change the subject, where are the others?”

“S-Sayama-sama is in the underground medical facility. He just contacted me to say he would be back soon, but…”

Kazami sighed and nodded.

It had only been two hours since Shinjou had been rushed to Japanese UCAT.

Kazami had ridden back from the city center on the same helicopter that carried Shinjou and Sayama, who had refused to let go of the girl.

When he had refused to leave her in the medical facility, Kazami had slapped him once.

…And yet I refused to leave Kaku’s side when his arm was smashed.

Shinjou had taken a knife in the back protecting Sayama. It had luckily passed between the lungs, but it had also arrived near the heart. The surgery would primarily involve rejoining blood vessels while making sure not to damage the major arteries. The doctors predicted it would be a difficult surgery and she also needed a major blood transfusion.

The situation was all the more frightening because the attack had come from someone with the name Mikoku under the effects of 2nd-Gear’s Concept Core.

From what Kazami had heard, the name “Mikoku” would be carved into Shinjou’s life within four hours if some kind of conceptual countermeasures were not taken.

Shinjou would be undergoing surgery to heal the wound itself while also undergoing a concept surgery to remove the attack power of the name concept driven into her body.

The process should have been relatively easy, but the effects of 2nd-Gear’s Concept Core had turned the life-carving concept of “Mikoku” into a Concept

Core attack.

The people of 2nd-Gear could not hope to match 2nd-Gear's Concept Core.

They had considered destroying the concept with Georgius, but as long as the life-carving concept was directly linked to her life, the odds were good that would destroy her life.

Sayama had likely been warned that it might only be a matter of time.

…It'll be okay.

Kazami recalled her memories of Shinjou. That underclassman had often hesitated, often cried, often laughed, and always worked desperately toward everything.

It'll be okay. Sayama is alive and as long as he lives, Shinjou won't die, she thought, despite having nothing to base the assertion on. *Hurry on back.*

And…

"Sayama?"

In front of her and behind Sibyl, a white armored uniform appeared as if parting the crowd gathered there.

It was Sayama.

He was approaching the helicopter after climbing the stairs from underground.

Everyone turned around, looked at him, and started to say something, but…

"——————"

Their words vanished and they remained silent.

Why this happened was obvious. Sayama had Baku on his head like usual, his face was pale, his gaze was sharp, and…

…He's lost weight.

His exhaustion from the past few hours had left its mark on him.

Saying anything felt like it would be asking why he looked like that, so no one could say anything. If they did, they thought they would remind him of his pain.

But his legs were sturdy below him and he walked straight up to Kazami.

He then turned to Sibyl.

"Where are the Hiba boy, Harakawa, and Heo-kun?"

His voice was hoarse, but Sibyl only had to breathe in once to control her expression.

"Testament. Hiba-sama is visiting Mikage-sama in the development department. Harakawa-sama and Heo-sama are…"

She trailed off for a moment, but…

"Heo-sama is isolating herself a little due to the shock of how her representative battle ended. Harakawa-sama is in American UCAT's Yokota branch with her."

"In other words, we can use neither Susamikado nor Thunder Fellow."

Sayama placed a hand on his chin.

"If that is all, we still have strength to spare. Let us go. The enemy likely plans to use the positive and negative concepts to create a resurrection philosopher's

stone. I would have liked to allow that if I could, but creating such an item would produce conflict."

"Someone with a philosopher's stone like that wouldn't die. They'd be an immortal god."

Kazami saw Sibyl and the surrounding people gasp at her statement, so she smiled bitterly.

Acting tough can help cheer people up too, she thought while turning to Sayama.

"You're looking better."

"Say I look more determined."

He sounded casual enough, but his expression was still stiff.

But it's better than crying, thought Kazami.

He was not yet back to his normal self and that would likely not happen until Shinjou had recovered, but…

…Being the leading villain must be tough.

And in that case, she thought while resting the spear on her shoulder.

"Let's go. We'll help you out."

"…Sorry."

"You idiot. You're supposed to say thank you."

Sayama briefly froze as if he had only just realized that and he brought a hand to his forehead.

"Right," he said with a nod.

The gesture and his voice lacked his usual strength, but Kazami made sure to keep talking.

"Besides, there's not much we can do without you."

"So it seems," he said with a bitter smile.

She decided to believe him and told herself it would all be okay, but she also wondered if that was more of her acting tough.

And then…

"Wah! Sorry I'm late! It's me, Hiba Ryuuji!"

A boy in a white armored uniform appeared behind them all.

He had supposedly been visiting Mikage in the development department.

Currently, they were trying a variety of methods to wake her up and it seemed she was already tossing and turning as well as muttering things in her sleep.

Hiba approached through the crowd behind Sibyl.

Everyone had heard him, so they turned around.

And as they did, they prepared to say something to him, but…

"Oh, Mikage-san is just so cute even when she's asleep. She keeps saying 'food' in her sleep!"

Everyone nodded, but far from falling silent, they began muttering to themselves.

"I just decided bragging deserves the death penalty."

“You’d better watch your back if you sit by the helicopter door.”

“Hello, yes. Is this the 1st-Gear reservation? I would like a piece of paper with ‘curse’ written on it. Yes, ASAP.”

“Wh-why are you all so cement-like!?”

“Shut up,” sighed Kazami before asking Hiba a question. “So how was Mikage?”

A smile quickly replaced his confusion.

“Yes, well, it really seems like she’s only sleeping now. Director Tsukuyomi even said she’ll probably wake up soon.”

“I see.” Kazami nodded and turned to Sayama. “Sayama, you can see how many death flags this poor underclassman is raising, can’t you?”

“Yes. I am beginning to think my own situation might not be all that bad. If I died, Shinjou-kun would stop receiving my communication signals and might die of despair.”

“D-death flags!? What are you talking about!?”

Kazami ignored Hiba’s question and asked one of her own.

“Hiba, how has your luck been recently?”

“Well, my grandfather’s house will be fixed on New Year’s, and he’ll be giving me some New Year’s money to celebrate!”

Everyone gulped, but Hiba did not notice.

“I’m gonna have so much money for next year, so-… Wait, why are you all patting me on the shoulder and walking away?”

“It’ll be a miracle if you survive this.”

“Eh?”

He tilted his head, but Kazami turned back to Sayama.

However, Sayama had already turned his back.

He faced the helicopter that Izumo lay collapsed beneath and sighed into the air.

He pulled out the silver pocket watch that was a memento of his grandfather and compared the time with his wristwatch.

“Honestly, you two are always so terribly identical.”

He sounded weak but placed the watch back in his pocket like a protective charm and then raised his left hand.

“Let us go to the battlefield,” he said. “I must settle this quickly, return, and wake Shinjou-kun with a kiss.”

Do I wish
For it to end?

—We will not immerse ourselves in the past.

Chapter 1

“The Joy of an Outing”

Hidden feelings
Can remain hidden
They are personal and their joy can also be hidden in your heart

●

During the night, most of the light had vanished from the residential district, but one area remained lit by more than just the streetlights.

It was a large house surrounded by a wall.

The gate was open and a blue tarp was spread out just inside. A folded-up festival stand and its framework were piled up on the tarp and several people were working to put it away.

But one person sat out in front of the gate.

She was a woman wearing a leather jacket over a kimono. She sat on the gate's curb and stared intently to the east.

The eyes behind her glasses were fixated on the dark residential district and the pale light in the sky beyond.

That faint brightness came from the lights shining up on the winter sky.

"Taka-Akita's festival is still ongoing…"

Her comment received a response from the roof of the gate.

"Ms. Ryouko, waiting for Ms. Shino?"

"Yeah. Setsu-chan didn't come back either, so I thought they might be playing together. Poyanski, you thought so too, didn't you?"

A deep sound descended from afar. It seemed to shake the air as it travelled through the heavens.

"There have been a lot of planes today."

"That was fighter jet."

"I guess a former soldier would know that. Is there a war going on or something?"

Her question was answered by the young man in a suit who walked out from the gate.

"You always make things sound so dangerous, sister. From what we managed to intercept, it seems they're holding some kind of night exercise in Kansai. But…"

"But what, Kouji?"

"There are more planes flying around than reported. And according to Toki-san, military bases in the West, Asia, the Middle East, and Russia are working together with Japan."

Ryouko tilted her head.

"If that was true, it would be big news. There would be fighters flying around on a global scale."

"That's what doesn't make sense."

Kouji sat next to Ryouko and pulled two paper cups of coffee out from behind him.

"Bases around the world are working with Japan, but it seems no one can see any of the fighters."

"No one can see them?"

“Like I said, the bases are really busy, but they can’t see the fighters.”

“Oh.” Ryouko nodded in understanding. “So the world’s super technology has created fighters that idiots can’t see. That would explain why you can’t see them but I can.”

“If you can see them, then tell me what’s flying overhead right now.”

She looked up in the sky and narrowed her eyes.

“Hmm. Ah! See!? It’s flying! It’s a twin-engine bomber with pink frills! Did that design come from Shibuya? Is it a Shibu-Bomber? That’s so cool!”

“Sister… You don’t have to get all worked up and lie about it.”

“I-I am not lying! I can see it! It’s flying right there! You can hear it cawing to the west!”

“Yes, yes, yes. Yeah, it sure is flying and cawing there. Yeah, no question about it.”

“What are you talking about, Kouji? Is there something wrong with your brain? Are you actually a moron? Oh, sorry. Should I not have asked that?”

“You said it first!”

“Give me some coffee and I’ll go easy on you.”

“Fine, fine.”

He held out one of the paper cups.

“Why is my sister so…”

He trailed off and looked up at the roof with the other cup.

“What about you, Poya-san?”

“Leave there and I will drink.”

“Pes has been asking for it for a while, so are you sure you want to leave it here?”

“I might not drink.”

“Sure, sure.”

Kouji set the cup on the edge of the gate’s lintel and then sat back on the curb.

“But ignoring all that activity, where has Shino-san gotten off to?”

“…”

“I haven’t seen her since she said she would buy us some drinks. Nagase-san, who was playing the Festival Stand Detective, forgot to rehydrate, so the next thing we knew, he was so dehydrated he began giving a confused roadside speech. It was something about demanding the return of the Northern Territories so he could turn them into the Bear Kingdom.”

“That would be problem. Penguin Land better name.”

“But everyone thought the speech was part of the show.”

“Best to ignore, Mr. Kouji.”

“Calm down.” Kouji sighed while quieting down the roof. “But after Nagase-san collapsed, we removed the mask and found him passed out with a refreshing smile on his face. Then again, it might have just been his face stiffening up from the dehydration. …Not that any of that is Shino-san’s responsibility.”

He then faced Ryouko who had fallen silent and he smiled bitterly.

“Do you think she isn’t coming back because the atmosphere here just wasn’t a good fit for- Why did you just collapse on your back and fall asleep, sister! At least listen to what I’m saying!”

“Eh? O-oh, sorry, Kouji. You were letting your love of little girls burst from your soul as all that pedo talk about Shi-chan, so I had to restrain myself so much I actually fell asleep. I was so serious the coffee’s caffeine didn’t stand a chance! So? Have you finished that filthy discussion, you genuine pedophile?”

“I-I didn’t say anything ‘filthy’.”

“And you won’t even admit it!? How was any of that not filthy? How are you not a pedo!? Honestly, I’m promoting you from genuine to super genuine! I hope you become a white dwarf and shrink away!”

“Not that it matters, but can’t I explode and become black hole instead?”

“Do you have any idea how much trouble that would cause the neighbors? And are you trying to become the center of a galaxy or something? What would your galaxy be called? The Genuine Galaxy? …Yay! I said it, I said it!”

Ryouko was so worked up that she stood and clapped her hands once. Responding claps came from the nearby wall, gate, and manhole.

She then turned around.

“So what were we talking about?”

“You’re the worst, sister!!”

“K-Kouji’s being a bully!!”

“Can you stop talking on reflex and actually use your left brain!? What is even in that half of your skull!?”

“P-probably…brains, I guess?”

“Please don’t sound so unsure.”

“Oh, c’mon. It’s not like you’ve ever seen inside your own head.” She took a sip of coffee. “Well, it doesn’t really matter, but Shi-chan has a big sister. You don’t have to worry about her too much, so get inside and make me a midnight snack.”

“I wasn’t actually out here to wait for her, you know?”

He stood up and let his shoulders droop a little.

“I have a feeling she isn’t coming back, so…”

“So you came here to tell me to stop waiting? Don’t be silly.” Ryouko smiled bitterly and sat back on the curb. “I’m waiting for Shi-chan to make sure I don’t have to wait for her anymore.”

“…”

“This is a ritual for me. And you know what?”

She looked up in the sky and heard an airplane fly from south to west.

“I like to think Shi-chan holds the fate of the world in her hands, so armies from around the world are chasing after her right now. Girls like to dream, you know?”

“That is quite the dangerous dream.”

“Wow, I could hear the young master saying that!!”

Kouji smiled a bit at that, but then sighed and took a step toward the gate.

“Well, you take care of things here, sister.”

“Yes, yes. Leave this to me. …Shi-chan will be okay.”

She took a breath.

“I’m sure she’s surrounded by good people.”

“Yes,” replied the roof. “But Ms. Ryouko, are you okay? Very cold outside. Da, very cold”

Ryouko answered the roof’s concern with a gunshot.

●

There was a great noise.

It was a high-pitched noise that reverberated through the sky.

The surging sound was created as the atmosphere was split apart and eight aircraft were visible at the front end.

They were twin-engine fighters equipped for a ground attack.

They travelled west below the moon and their sides were decorated with American UCAT’s emblem. They belonged to American UCAT’s Atsugi Base.

The massive payload of bombs attached below their wings and the accelerators attached above the wings rid them of a normal fighter’s silhouette.

The oddly-shaped eight were flying west through the Tokai region.

The northern of the two in the lead lit up his optical communication pod.

“R1, this is BA1. BA and BB have secured our course. Shifting into weight reduction flight.”

A response came from the control craft flying above Suruga Bay far behind them.

“Testament, BA1. BA and BB, maintain your course. Attack craft teams AA and AB have also detected no enemies on their approach from Okinawa.”

“Testament,” replied BA Team’s commander before sighing. “R1, how well are the different countries working together? I want to avoid a midair collision while we’re all using stealth.”

“Testament. It seems the UCAT bases near the Sea of Japan have become a showcase for the world’s fighters. And they’re all waiting for our results.”

“Testament. So we have to do our job right as the opening act, do we? I’m sure D Team’s mechanical dragons will clean everything up once they arrive.”

“Testament. But BA1…”

“I know,” replied BA1. “The enemy has two aircraft: one mechanical dragon and one god of war. …And I remember having all of our mechanical dragons shot down by that god of war a month and a half ago.”

Also…

“I hear the pilot of that white god of war defeated our blue and white mechanical dragon.”

“Testament,” replied R1 before saying what they thought BA1 needed to hear.

“Don’t think about fighting. Fly straight in, scatter your bombs while accelerating, and get out of there.”

“I’m well aware. We don’t have the armor, hand-to-hand ability, or firepower of a mechanical dragon, but we still have our top speed since we’re smaller. This kind of mission is perfect for us.”

BA1 continued speaking while tearing through the wind in the lead.

“R1, has the girl of the blue and white dragon woken yet?”

“That is highly classified, so I can’t answer.”

Everyone listening smiled bitterly at the casual tone, but then someone spoke.

“Do you think that mechanical dragon will come back from the alternate space it was sent to?”

“Don’t rely on a girl,” succinctly replied BA1. “And I doubt she wants anyone to rely on her right now. …Not when she’s lost her power.”

But as soon as he finished speaking…

“———!?”

His fighter broke apart and scattered through the sky.

●

Everyone inside the control craft designated R1 froze when they realized what had happened.

But a moment later, the American UCAT members escaped their surprised despondency and managed to speak or begin moving.

They had already lost the transmission from BA1 and…

“BA2, BB1…and BA3 were lost!”

After the communications officer finished her report, a shout came in from B Team.

“This is BB4! R1… What happened!?”

When they heard BB4, everyone in R1 thought, “You were just shot down.”

They all gulped because they did not know why, but the situation would not wait for them to catch up.

“B Team, scatter and ascend!”

“R1, what is going on!? It looks like we lost some fighters! But there was no explosion or anythi-…”

The next voice was accompanied by the static of being shot down.

“I’m breaking apart!”

“BB4 has been lost!”

The communications officer seemed to have difficulty giving the report.

“A Team’s attackers will arrive in thirty-two seconds!”

Hearing that, everyone turned to one point in the aircraft.

One of Japanese UCAT’s automatons had been deployed to man the radar that checked for philosopher’s stone readings.

The businesslike maid illuminated by the pale red light was named #66. The data from the battle against 3rd-Gear and from the Army’s attack on UCAT had

been downloaded into her personal memory.

"I am detecting Typhon and Alex's readings. Typhon's is within thirty kilometers to the west, but its output is too weak for flight."

However…

"I am detecting a philosopher's stone reading elsewhere, but it only ever lasts an instant."

"Elsewhere?"

"Testament," replied #66 while noting that the screen indicated that BB3 had been shot down as well. "The reading appears on the fighters in the instant that they are shot down!"

As she spoke, the information she was receiving confirmed her suspicions, so she turned toward the other frowning people.

"This is not an attack by Typhon or Alex! This instantaneous output is only seen from a close-range attack of a handheld concept weapon!" she said. "The enemy is using a concept weapon to bring down the fighters directly without causing an explosion!!"

●

BA4 was ascending toward the moon when he saw BB2 break apart in the moonlight up above him.

There was no explosion.

Nor was it broken apart.

It simply scattered its pieces with no flames or smoke.

BA4 saw fragments, the frame, pieces of explosives that scattered without a detonation, and…

"!!"

Someone stood on his own fighter's nose.

Moonlight washed over the back of a girl holding a curved blade.

The wind blew at her hair, combat coat, and skirt and she wore red pumps on her feet.

There was nothing BA4 could do.

He could not aim his machineguns at someone standing on the nose and the missiles were meant for ground strikes.

He considered accelerating so the wind would sweep her away, but he was already travelling at three times the speed of sound which was apparently not enough.

"…!"

He suddenly rolled to catch her off guard.

He added in a bit of yaw to swing the fighter around, but…

"Impossible!"

He had been trained to react to high-speed movement, so he saw it all.

The enemy kept up with the fighter's movements simply by lowering her hips a little.

It looked a lot like she was riding a surfboard.

For just an instant, the moonlight revealed her expression.

Her mouth and eyes showed a silent smile.

She then opened that mouth and raised the sword.

“Surprised? I had Typhon throw me from below so I could pretend to be a human shell.”

BA4 recalled that Top-Gear had two female swordsmen. The younger was nearly immortal and the older had a strange concept weapon.

“That concept weapon absorbs its target’s attack and makes it its own.”

“Yes,” replied the smiling girl. “First, I stored one of Typhon’s blasts and used that to destroy one fighter after being throw here.”

She took a breath.

“Then I absorb the blast created by the explosion to recycle it against the next fighter.”

This enemy also controlled the direction of the destruction so that the recoil of the blast allowed her to hop to the next fighter.

They had scattered and ascended to see what their enemy was, but that enemy had moved to the first ascending fighter and worked her way down as she destroyed them.

And as for the sword she held…

“This is charged with the recycled explosions of eight fighters, so it will cause quite a boom if I use it all at once.”

At the same time, a transmission reached BA4’s ears.

It was the relieved voice of R1’s communications officer.

“BA4! A Team has arrived!”

He saw them both on the radar and with the naked eye. Eight attack craft were arriving from the west.

However, BA4 silently begged them to stay away.

As soon as they arrived, their enemy was going to hit him with the explosive power she had accumulated thus far.

It contained the explosions of eight ground-attack fighters, their explosives, and a blast from Typhon’s cannon.

That would undoubtedly burn through the sky and blow away everything there in an instant.

So BA4 tried to tell them to escape.

But in that moment, the skirt before his eyes fluttered upwards and he shouted something else instead.

“White!”

The enemy stabbed her sword downwards with a smile and BA4 scattered below the moonlight.

In the final moment, he saw her moonlit form.

●

Heo slowly awoke.

“…”

She seemed to have been placed in a bed on top of some fairly hard fabric.

But she did not know what position her body was in; she could not even guess.

She could not rouse any thoughts.

She felt like her mind was empty and like she was blankly watching herself from the outside.

She did not try to move or even consider it as a possibility.

Her consciousness was entirely closed.

She knew why: she did not want to remember.

If she did remember, she would also remember that there was nothing she could do.

And if there was nothing she could do, she had no power.

So there was no point in doing anything.

She was filled with a great sense of powerlessness.

Thinking about power only reminded her of the moment when she lost it.

If there was no point in being, then she thought she might as well die, but she could not even think about that too seriously and she simply tried to erase her thoughts as a substitute.

If she thought nothing, she would not lose anything. If she hoped for nothing, she would not feel anything.

The only thing at the base of her powerless thoughts was the decision to stay still and let others ignore her.

She wanted to go to some dark place.

She wanted to go to some quiet place.

She wanted to go to some solitary place.

And she felt like that wish was being granted. She felt like a wall separated her from her skin, but that skin felt air which was chilly enough to be called cold and her ears sensed silence.

“____”

She opened her eyes, but not of her own will.

She had simply abandoned even the strength she needed to keep her eyelids shut.

Even keeping her eyes shut had felt like doing something, so her eyes opened and she stared blankly forward.

She should have seen the white wall of the infirmary, but she instead saw the night sky.

Not only that, but she had a full view of that sky and all the stars therein.

“Eh?”

She was lying in a bed, but there were no windows, walls, or ceiling. There was not even a floor.

“…!?”

Fear over this unknown situation won out over her self-imposed stupor.

Her pulse raced and she sat up as she wondered what had happened.

She then realized that this was at the top of a mountain cliff and her bed had been placed on the edge of that cliff.

The bed was the reclining type used in hospitals and its white frame and blanket had been placed on the grassy clifftop such that she was looking up into the sky.

“So you’re finally up, Heo Thunderson.”

She turned toward the sudden voice to her side and saw a boy sitting at the head of the bed on the side closer to the mountain. His right arm held a machinegun encased in a white cowling.

“Harakawa?”

He did not turn her way.

He simply stared ahead and said nothing more.

His silence confused her. Why was he not saying anything?

That was when the sky split open.

Sudden red split through the dark blue of the starry and moonlit sky.

The silence was broken by a bursting sound of impact and crimson flames blossomed in the sky.

For just a moment, Heo knew what that crimson light was, but something else escaped her mouth.

“Why…?”

She gasped a bit as she looked into the sky.

She gulped, tensed her shoulders, and slowly opened her mouth again.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“Don’t ask the obvious, Heo. Heo Thunderson.”

She snapped back at the word “obvious”.

“How is this obvious?”

She spoke quietly, but that was enough to sap her of strength.

She was closing up.

But she continued to speak because she wanted him to understand this at the very least.

“I have no power right now.”

However, Harakawa did not turn toward her.

She only heard him speak a quick question.

“So what, Heo Thunderson?”

●

This time, Harakawa did turn toward Heo.

There was more noise in the sky, so there was likely light as well.

However, he only looked at her pale face with tears welling up in the eyes.

“There is a battlefield for you whether you have any power or not.”

He could also hear noise from beyond the forest visible west of the cliff.

The American UCAT troops that had dropped them off here had engaged the

enemy.

They were fighting with no air support and they would likely change their mission from an assault to a diversion.

Japanese UCAT had yet to arrive, but he knew they had to be nearby since they intended to charge in after American UCAT's attack.

But, he thought.

"I don't know if those crazy people can win this time."

There was a reason for that.

"First, Sayama doesn't have Shinjou, so he can't raise his bizarre excitement gauge to max. Also, the violent comedy couple have lost their Concept Core weapon pets. And of course, Hiba has been without Mikage so long he can act without thinking while also having Susamikado off limits."

"That's quite an accurate analysis."

"Yes." He nodded and looked Heo in the eye. "And we don't have Thunder Fellow."

Heo shrank back, but he did not care.

He spoke the truth without holding back.

"Our strength has fallen considerably and our enemy could keep up with us before. That means…"

That meant…

"Our enemy is far more powerful than us right now."

And…

"There's another problem."

"Eh?"

Wind swept her question away.

It was the cold winter wind of a mountain.

The whiteness of her breath made the air seem all the more invisible.

And Harakawa spoke to add meaningful color to that transparency.

"I'm talking about Babel, Heo."

He looked up at the sky above the mountain.

Beyond the forest, a great tower pierced the heavens in the dim light.

"Based on the documents he found he can read now, Sayama concluded that Babel has been partially active ever since ten years ago to restrain the activated negative concepts contained inside. And since Babel is Noah, the Top-Gear residents will be allowed in."

He took a breath.

"Noah will treat the people of Top-Gear like gods and do whatever they say. It can create concepts as instructed by its 'gods', so Top-Gear can now influence this entire world."

"B-but…!"

Heo threw her words his way, so he turned around.

As if to surpass the cold wind, she held a hand to her chest with the night sky in the background.

“What can I do in such an important fight!?”

“I have fingers, so I can pull a trigger.”

Harakawa immediately answered her and stood from the bed.

“I have eyes, so I can see the enemy approaching.”

He spoke.

“I have a mouth, so I can inform people of things.”

He continued speaking.

“I have ears, so I can grasp the situation on the battlefield.”

And…

“I have a body, so I can show people that something is there to support them.”

Also…

“Everyone has this much, Heo Thunderson. …Most people don’t have the kind of power we did.”

Now that I think about it, Sayama’s the representative example of that, thought Harakawa.

Heo stared blankly up at him and he spoke toward her powerless eyes.

“But even if I lost my power, I can still drive a motorcycle and I have pretty good eyes. It’s no more of an advantage than anyone else, but that kind of advantage is important on the battlefield.”

What about you?

“Being the same as everyone else doesn’t make you powerless, Heo Thunderson. If you make good use of the slight advantages you have, they will bring even more power. And if you continue to train those advantages and accumulate even more…”

You’ll probably become the kind of person people call stupid.

But, he thought. *What about you?*

“In battles, everyone is shorthanded. Everyone wants someone by their side when things are feeling hopeless and they want something to protect. The battlefield is for the people who can fight, but more than that…it’s a helpless place that is always asking for help.”

He looked straight at Heo from where he stood.

“So. Are you willing to reach out to the battlefield that is asking for help?” he asked. “And I know it’s a little late for this…but put on some clothes, Heo Thunderson. They’re on the edge of the bed.”

“Eh?”

Heo looked down at herself.

The blanket had fallen from her upper body when she sat up, so it was completely bare.

“Eh? Ah, w-wait. What is this!?”

“It was your teacher that removed your clothes, so don’t ask me. She also put you on the transport helicopter.”

“W-wait a second! Removing some of them is one thing, but why am I completely naked!?”

“Isn’t that your cruel personal skill? Also, Germans are all perfectionists.”

“Y-you find a reason for everything, don’t you!?”

To protest, she gathered the blanket in front of her chest and pounded on the bed.

“Then why…why is everyone trying to get me to fight!?”

She hit the bed again as she shouted.

“Tell me that! Because I’ve lost track of why I’m even here!”

Harakawa heard a shaking sound as she hit the bed.

Heo’s eyebrows were raised in anger, but her face was gradually rising and leaning backwards.

“Huh? Harakawa?”

“What is it, Heo?”

“For some reason, I can see the sky even though I’m sitting up.”

“Yeah, and it looks to me like you and the bed are tipping backwards.”

“Oh, c’mon, Harakawa. You make it sound like the bed is shaking and falling off the cliff.”

“If that was enough for you to understand, I must be better with words than I thought. The bed’s about to reach a ninety degree tilt.”

And it did.

●

Heo was thrown out into the air.

She gasped as the bed toppled over.

It seemed to scrape her right shoulder as it rotated around to point straight down.

…The sky…

She was tipped a bit on her back, wrapped in the blanket, and falling.

She felt weightless and the night sky quickly grew more distant.

There was a drop of around a dozen meters behind her.

If she fell, she would die.

She would be no more.

And at the bottom of her vision, she saw Harakawa standing on the edge of the cliff.

…Harakawa.

But she noticed that he was not trying to help her.

He simply stared at her while still holding the gun.

He did not budge.

She felt like he was pushing her away.

Did she not matter to him?

…Even I thought I didn’t matter…

And now the person she most wanted to understand her was pushing her away.

Then this must be the end, she thought.

…Eh?

She noticed a certain fact and a certain contradiction.

First, the fact.

Who did she most want to understand her even as she felt she did not matter?

Wasn't it Harakawa, the one who had chosen to entrust this with her even though she did not matter?

But that created a contradiction.

Why did she need to choose the end if Harakawa understood her?

Why would that be the case if he had given her his understanding?

She had no power. She was physically weak, she was young, she was short, and her breasts were small. Her breasts and her butt had grown a little recently, although she did not plan to announce that fact until it was more visually noticeable and she had no idea what she was thinking about anymore, but in short, she was powerless.

But she was not alone.

So what should she choose now: the stars visible in the sky or the motionless boy?

"…"

She gulped as she fell.

She was already passing below the edge of the cliff.

The blanket wrapped around her began to flutter in the wind and gravity pulled her downwards.

It was too late.

She had noticed her contradiction and what she wanted, but it was too late now.

However, she saw a new crimson flower blossom in the sky.

In that brief moment, she moved. She reached her hand toward the sky as if to pluck those flower petals.

She thrust her hand skyward and she received an answer.

A power forcibly stretched her body.

It was Harakawa's hand grasping her own hand.

"It's all right."

Her body shook and her entire weight bore down on her right hand and shoulder.

But her entire body was lifted upwards. It was a slow movement that could not quite be called an ascent.

"Yes, there is only one reason, Heo. As I said, it's 'all right'. In other words, everything is 'right'. So it's all right, Heo."

She saw him raise his eyebrows in a smile as he pulled up her hand.

"Let's get to the battlefield, Heo. The idiots will be there soon, too."

●

Light raced through darkness.

The light rushing through the forest at the bottom of a mountain was a high speed train.

However, it was already late at night, so no such train should have been running.

Nevertheless, the streamlined front car towed the rest of the cars as they broke through the wind on their westward journey.

Not all of the cars were for passengers.

A few specialized transportation cars were positioned right after the front car and behind the passenger cars.

Also, the passenger cars were covered in armor and figures were visible on their roofs.

Those figures were automatons wearing combat maid uniforms.

Two automatons stood atop the transport container loaded on the second car. They stared sharply forward and sent out their shared thoughts.

“Our current speed is two hundred and seventy kilometers per hour. I have determined we have made up for the time lost transferring over from the transport helicopter.”

“This is an excellent train. But I never knew IAI was developing anything like this.”

They looked down at the racing vehicle below their feet.

“This next generation high-speed train has a top speed of four hundred and twenty kilometers per hour, and yet it is a high-speed stealth train that counteracts the sounds of collisions by creating buffer bands between the cars.”

“They wanted to name it after the fact that riding it is so nice it actually feels good, so they had someone sum up that idea in a single word.”

The automatons looked to the side of the car.

Someone had used a brush to paint “Creepy” in large letters.

“I have determined this is incomprehensible.”

“Testament. We are about to leave the Tokaido Line, so get ready down below.”

Those shared memories were sent to #8, the automaton inside one of the armored passenger cars.

●

Inside the long passenger car, #8 listened to the report from the automatons on the roofs.

It was almost time to enter the battle.

However, she tried to be considerate. So as not to rush those around her, she served tea and coffee to the people in armored uniforms sitting in the rows of three seats and then slowly spoke.

“Okay, break’s over.”

“Ehhh! Already!?”

Hearing them shout, she wondered if she had worked a little too hard making

the break seem nice.

But she refocused and looked across everyone there.

“The Creepy is about to enter autonomous mode. We will accelerate to gain some inertial force, so I have determined the drinks I just served will be your last time to rest.”

“Testament,” replied everyone inside the white light of the car.

They were all from Japanese UCAT’s special division and most of them were from Team Leviathan.

Izumo and Kazami were amusing themselves by playing cards with Sibyl and Boldman while the others were looking down at their card version of mahjong or their handheld game systems.

“Report. American UCAT failed to achieve air superiority over the Mount Ikoma region. They now plan to send their mechanical dragons in by land.”

Everyone clearly focused on the incoming transmission.

After a moment, light boards were handed over the backs of the seats and passed out to everyone. They displayed the documents that each platoon and company used to confirm with their commander what they should do.

Each time a new announcement came in, the text would gain details or additional opinions. By the time they set foot on the battlefield, each commander would know what they needed to do.

…But…

#8 looked to her side.

Sayama sat alone in the very first row of seats.

His seat was fully reclined, a towel covered his eyes, and Baku sat on his head as he slept.

…Will he be okay?

She had heard that Shinjou was badly injured and also in conceptual danger.

He received regular updates on her state by cellphone, but the situation did not look good. He had finally gone to sleep after Ooki had promised to email him if anything changed.

There was nothing #8 could do, but the very fact that she could not think of any kind of plan made her painfully aware of the wasted cycles of her activity clock.

But he asked nothing of her.

She felt this time waiting for instructions was wasted, but…

…This means that he is okay.

She upped the thought priority level of that fact she could take from her records. She told herself not to think about anything else or to make unnecessary decisions.

A maid only had to trust in her master because an automaton would not serve someone she could not trust.

Suddenly, she thought of the Moirai.

The Gear reservations had decided to maintain their silence on the current

situation.

That was obviously because they had decided the conflict between Top-Gear and Low-Gear was still ongoing.

They had entrusted everything to the Leviathan Road meeting and had said they were waiting for the results.

The Concept Cores must have had a similar understanding because they did not display any kind of desire to be saved.

The only people from other Gears taking part in this attack were the automatons and the people from 2nd or 6th who had joined UCAT and Low-Gear.

But #8 sent Moira 1st access to her shared thoughts and asked what to do when her master looked about to lose heart.

They had given each other access permissions when they had met the other day. She had assumed she could make use of her downtime by receiving some new information or tips.

“Moira 1st-sama.”

After connecting, auditory information streamed in from Moira 1st.

“Yes, Lady Miyako, tonight’s dinner is your favorite instant ramen: Drenched #1 – Soy Sauce Flavor. Say ‘ah’, Lady Miyako.”

“Hold on. That’s really not something you do with ramen.”

“Ehhh? You don’t want to? Does it have to have mayonnaise for that?”

“That isn’t the issu-… What do you think the rest of you are looking at!?”

#8 did not listen any longer because it would be an invasion of their privacy. She determined it was an event mission to raise their master-maid intimacy level.

…If only Sayama-sama would give me that kind of opportunity.

No, she determined. *Those opportunities are probably being given to Shinjou-sama.*

In that case, I want to set things up for the two of them, she thought while closing her eyes.

She cooled her thoughts with a sigh and looked to Sayama.

She simply pulled a blanket from the container above the window and placed it over him, but she felt that was enough. The train would enter autonomous mode in just a few minutes.

With the blanket on him, Sayama stirred a bit and spoke in his sleep as if groaning.

“Ahhh, Shinjou-kun, you are so bold… Y-you cannot mean it. You’re taking it all in your mouth…and…and swallowing it? Yes, if you are going to drink all of the soup, it has to be this high-calorie, high-sodium Drenched #1!”

After noticing he seemed to be having a good dream, she debated whether she should inform Moira 1st of this synchronicity or plainly tell him that instant ramen made you fat. But before she made a decision, she heard someone speak from the opposite seat.

“Are we almost to the battlefield, #8-kun?”

She turned around to find Ooshiro and simply glared at him.

“Why are you here?”

“Wah! You’ve already decided I’m an outcast!? Are you shunning me!? You are, aren’t you!?”

“Please quiet down. More importantly, Ooshiro-sama, are you familiar with the word ‘useless’?”

He raised his hands as a sign of protest.

“I-I am to useful!”

She nodded and accurately reproduced an expression she had recently learned.

“Ooshiro-sama, is this the appropriate way of expressing disrespect? I am still not used to this expression.”

“That’s not just disrespect! That’s a look of pure contempt!”

“Testament. Thank you very much. As it was received much better than expected, I will make ample use of it from now on. Anyway, Ooshiro-sama, you are too thin to act as a shield and get in our way too much to act as a wall, so can’t you do something about that?”

“W-well, you see… I’m quite useful. I have intelligence, strength, and beauty!!”

He stood up and struck a flirtatious pose, so #8 looked around.

She saw the others waving their hands in front of their faces, so she nodded.

“Ooshiro-sama. Please choose one of the following: 1. Pretend you never said that. 2. Take back what you said. 3. Die and apologize. …Which would you like?”

The others all wrote “3! 3!” on their light boards and raised them high, but #8 shook her head.

“You mustn’t do that, everyone. I have determined this is a problem Ooshiro-sama must solve on his own.”

“#-#8-kun, you are surprisingly fair. I’m a little moved.”

“Testament.” She nodded and slapped his head thrice. “Now, please think carefully. 3 is the only real option, after all.”

“How is that thinking carefully!?”

The majority already decided for you, so stop being so selfish, she thought just as an electronic tone played from the car’s speakers.

“Um, uh, um, in thirty minutes, the, uh, Creepy will…enter autonomous mode. Uh, we will begin, uh, accelerating soon, so, uh, all passengers had better stay in your damn seats!! …Uh, I mean please remain seated.”

They all sat back down and #8 started to sit in a nearby seat but hesitated.

However, she ultimately took the seat behind Sayama instead of her usual one.

At the same time, she saw the boy slowly sit up in the seat in front of her.

He raised the seat, so she could not see him, but she heard him.

“#8-kun, thank you for the blanket. …It was short, but I had a wonderful dream. I appreciate it.”

She compared his voiceprint with one from the past but found it was lacking something.

But, she thought. *If he is willing to thank the one who serves him, he must have regained his awareness that he is my master.*

So he should be fine, she decided while speaking with the others via shared memory.

“Get ready. We are about to accelerate.”

A moment later, that was exactly what they did.

●

The automatons standing atop the high-speed train created a wall of gravitational control to combat the pressure of the wind as they accelerated.

Their clothes, hair, and everything else fluttered and bent in the wind.

“And our hearts only bend to the will of our master!”

The maids saw the track turn a bit to the north. The Tokaido Line turned north to the Kyoto region and then south toward Osaka.

The track had no sharp curves, so the trains could maintain their speed. It was a gradual but definite northward turn.

However…

“That will not take us to the Mount Ikoma region in south Osaka!”

Then what were they to do?

The answer was given by the shouts of the two automatons standing on the front car.

“Prepare autonomous mode!!”

They were answered by the maids standing on the transport container on the second car.

“Prepare!!”

An automaton rushed from both emergency exits on each car.

They pushed at the wind with their gravitational control. There was one on either side of the twelve cars for a total of twenty four.

They all spread their hands outward.

“Contact!”

As soon as they yelled that word, the white pallet covering the second car suddenly leaped into the air.

The wind carried the giant lid into the night sky and something was revealed below.

“Track Facility Mechanism ‘Moirai’! Begin deployment!”

A giant spindle machine rose from the car.

The mechanism was seven meters tall, twenty meters long, and shaped like an upside-down iron. It had twelve giant spindles on either side, but those spindles were not wrapped with thread.

They were wrapped with rails and the front spindles launched those iron threads.

The two metal rails broke the sound barrier as they flew forward.

The twin lines of steel tore through the night and passed the front car, but the automatons on the front car did not overlook them.

“Begin spinning!!”

Those front two used their full gravitational control to draw the flying tracks toward their hands.

They bent the metal thread down as if rotating it around to the nose of the front car.

“Contact!!”

At the same time, the four automatons standing to the front of the second car stepped down on the back of the front car’s roof.

The high-gravity attack bent the roof, but it also noticeably lifted the nose of the car.

And the car landed atop the track being released from that very same train.

Now that it was on its self-laid path, it only had to continue on.

The spinning machine spun out the track, the automatons on the front car pulled it in, and the maids on the back car supported the bottom of the autonomous track with their gravitational control.

All of this created one thing.

“A high-speed train which can choose its own path!”

The two on the front car accurately bent the track toward the sky.

The sonic train moved at greater than four hundred kph as its own track carried it into empty air.

One of the spindles was exhausted in no time at all.

“Only twenty six kilometers until we arrive!”

“I have determined we have enough to spare!”

The automatons smiled amid the roar of the wind and the creaking of metal.

Gravitational control was their own technique and they were measuring levels of output they had never seen before.

Where did their limits lie?

As the moonlit automatons learned just that, they expressed the feeling with a single word: pleasant.

After all, they were fulfilling their job. That job was to transport the fighters to the battlefield.

And this was a job only they could do. What word would better describe that than pleasant?

The overheating, creaking, excessive calculations, and all the other burdens felt truly pleasant to them.

The train raced through the night sky.

The wind was cooling, the night was heavy, and the sounds were those of work.

“———!!”

They flew through the dark night toward some moonlit mountains.

They had already passed over the fields and reached the forest at the base of the mountains.

An expressway was visible below and they used that asphalt as a stepping stone.

“Here we go!”

The train leaped once more.

This time, they flew beyond the southern forest and into the mountains.

Based on the information gathered before leaving, there was a river there and they could follow it to the eastern Mount Ikoma region.

It was a fifteen kilometer journey which would take less than three minutes at their current speed.

They flew.

As if throwing their entire bodies forward, the automatons become one with their speed and desired to advance.

Shadowy trees raced by on either side and a river reflected the moon below.

They continued on.

The roaring sound and the wind bent the trees and the shockwave of their passing sent a reverse cascade of water and leaves into the sky after they passed.

The automatons had linked their sight and hearing devices as they focused only on their destination.

They kept on a straight line toward the mountains that had produced the river below.

…Here we go.

They all thought the same thing.

…We pull the humans onward to mountains filled with nature.

This was something they had been unable to do in 3rd-Gear.

It was always near the top on the lists of things they wanted to do, but it was always pushed further and further down the list.

They had made all of the food and drink being handed out inside the train.

It would have been perfect had it been daytime and sunny.

It did not matter whether they were heading into battle or not.

The goal was for the master to decide. The means was for the maid to decide.

A trip to the mountains required a box lunch.

And now, they were pulling the humans onward. Just like a maid leading her master to some flowers she had found in the mountains, they predicted what would make their masters happy and guided them to the battlefield.

Such a happy battle.

But…

“———!?”

The automatons on the front car saw an explosion.

The trees on either side of the river up ahead were suddenly blasted into the sky.

There was no sound. When breaking the sound barrier, that was to be expected.

Something charged toward them at faster than the speed of sound.

“That is…a mechanical dragon!” shouted an automaton’s mind.

A mechanical dragon with red, white, and blue armor flew their way with its main cannon mouth already opened.

It had been lying in wait to attack them.

There was only an instant until the attack, but the automatons continued their work. They continued spinning the track without fear.

“Good luck!!”

●

Alex did not hesitate.

Eighty percent of his armor had been replaced, but his frame had only had charms for the automatic healing of metal attached and his injuries were not yet healed.

Even so, he did not hesitate.

While Typhon was being worked on, Tatsumi had let it throw her so she could hold onto their air superiority. Similarly, it was his job to prevent Team Leviathan from rushing in.

Mikoku had already entered Babel on Noah’s guidance.

After ensuring their air superiority, Tatsumi had shifted to defense.

The others were deployed in formation and plenty of dolls had been sent out.

So Alex did not hesitate.

“This is a showdown!!”

He flew straight toward the train that acted like a long, subsonic shell.

He had no intention of firing on it from hiding or from the side.

…Justice is justice because it brings its righteousness head-on! [1]

So he accelerated.

“Destroy the enemy on sight! Alex Forcer!!”

He prepared to fire his main cannon, but he saw something just before he did.

As the train continued to spin its track and rush forward, the roof of one of the back cars blasted into the sky.

The white lid was cast aside like a cloak to reveal what lay below.

“A black god of war!?”

That was precisely what stood up.

However, this was not Tatsumi’s enemy, Susamikado.

It was a similar yet different model.

“Is that Susahito Custom!?”

As if to answer, Susahito Custom calmly moved.

It forcefully stood in the wind and water vapor trailed from the corners of its

armor.

“…!”

It held an anti-god of war rifle.

Alex recognized it as one of those used in the fight against Typhon.

Normally, it would not have been enough to break through a mechanical dragon’s armor.

However, their relative speeds and his imperfect state could change that.

“Bring it on!!”

He shouted and they both fired.

A moment later, the earth and the sky exploded along a straight line and that signaled the beginning of the battle.

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[1] A play on words using the kanji for “justice”.

Chapter 2

“Slope of Meeting”

In other words
Meetings are found
At the end of a mountain slope

●

The stars were quite visible in the winter night sky, but a few conditions had to be met for them to be seen.

First, the atmosphere had to be stable.

Second, there could not be any bright lights nearby.

Third, someone had to be there to see them.

A long runway in the mountains met conditions one and three and number two was underway.

The long runway's lights were switched off, starting from the far end.

It was as if the runway was going dark and silent.

It took less than a minute for the three thousand meters of light to vanish between the mountain and forest.

Once the residual light faded, only one thing remained.

"The starlight, huh?"

A woman in a white armored uniform and a scarf let out a white breath as she looked into the sky.

Her semi-long hair shook as she turned back toward a shadow.

The dark blue shade from the moon and starlight was provided by a beach parasol raised on the runway.

A man in a black suit sat on a long chair below it while a maid set up a telescope next to him.

The man finished wiping his mouth with a white handkerchief and looked to the woman in the scarf.

"Ooki-sensei, are you in charge while everyone else is away?"

"Ah, Itaru-san. You're older than me, so don't call me 'sensei'. I am grateful, though."

The maid responded to Ooki's comment while adjusting the angle of the telescope.

"Then may I refer to you as Ooki-sensei?"

"Of course. Oh, I can't wait to teach a class with someone like you in it, Sf-san."

"…I have determined I will not do that."

"Wh-why not?"

"Don't worry about it," said Itaru. "So did everyone else decide you were useless?"

"Th-that got specific in a hurry! ….And that isn't it. Kanda needs some support with concept related things. They needed someone to work with them from here, so I stayed behind."

"Then why are you out here?"

"Well, after I finished linking the devices, there was nothing more for me to do."

Sf and Itaru began whispering to each other.

“She was definitely excluded.”

“Is this what they call ostracism, Itaru-sama?”

“D-don’t say that loud enough for me to hear you,” complained Ooki. “And you know what?”

She raised a finger to gather their attention.

“They needed someone to keep them informed on Shinjou-san and Mikage-san’s conditions.”

“Then why aren’t you in the medical room or the development department?”

“I always get lost when I go underground,” she admitted with a hand on her head and a smile on her lips.

“Itaru-sama, I have never before seen someone so innately uncooperative.”

“Have you never looked in a mirror? Then look at your hand. That’s you.”

Sf looked at her palm as instructed.

“I have determined this is very philosophical.”

“Oh? Do you know how the character for ‘philosophy’ is written? By ‘bending’ your ‘mouth’. Into a frown. That’s often how I feel when I see you. Philosophical, isn’t it?”

“Tes. I have determined that is because I was made in Germany, the homeland of philosophy. Therefore, my every action requires an understanding of philosophy to grasp.”

“Oh, is that why seeing you fills me with melancholy and an urge to kill myself?”

“Tes. I have determined that is one of the trials of life. There are both mountains and valleys in life, after all. …Why you choose that treacherous route instead of the level sea is beyond me, though.”

“That’s because of you!!”

Ooki smiled as she listened to them.

“You two sure get along well.”

“Ooki-sensei, you’re too quick to assume there is good in everyone. She’s more than enough to prove that idea wrong.”

“Tes. Because that is what you wish for, Itaru-sama.”

Itaru let out a white sigh and collapsed back in the long chair.

But Ooki turned to Sf instead of him.

“Then what would you be like if Itaru-san didn’t wish for that?”

Sf tilted her head a bit, placed her hand on the set-up telescope, and replied expressionlessly.

“I was created exclusively for Itaru-sama, so there is nothing else I could *be like*. Even if identical models were mass-produced at some point, I have determined that I would be the only one that is me.”

She placed her other hand on her chest.

“An automaton’s heart is metal, so that point will never change.”

“I see.”

Ooki scratched her head and looked to the telescope Sf’s hand rested on.

“Do you like to look at the stars?”

“Tes. Itaru-sama does.”

As they turned toward him, Itaru let out an annoyed comment.

“It’s an old habit. We used to do this a lot.”

He viewed the dark runway through his sunglasses.

“We would shut off all the lights without permission, use a lantern to set the mood and keep track of our footing, and get all excited over seeing Saturn’s rings or something.”

Ooki glanced around, but saw no one else on the dark asphalt beyond her white breaths.

Everyone had either gone to Kansai or was working down below.

However, Sf suddenly opened her mouth.

“I can estimate that Itaru-sama imagines that there are people around him when he looks at the sky in an empty place.”

“Don’t speak for me,” he said while still looking to the runway. “But when you turn out all the lights, it feels like everything has already ended here. …Ooki-sensei, we’ll be taking care of a job down below in a bit, but don’t turn the lights back on.”

“Eh? But won’t that be a problem when the others get back?”

“Do as your supervisor tells you,” he said. “I’ll give you some orders soon, but until then, why not look at the stars?”

“Oh, can I mess with it?”

“Yes,” he replied with a shrug and a white sigh. “It’s better than having you go down and get lost.”

“Oh, yeah, I suppose so.”

“Then I’m counting on you. I’m sure I’ll have a few jobs for you.”

He let out another white breath as he spoke.

“You should be able to help those idiots fighting over Babel.”

●

The clash in the late-night mountain region began with a firefight between an American UCAT ground unit and a group of Top-Gear dolls waiting in the forest.

American UCAT made use of armor and explosives while the dolls kept their opponents in place with a hail of arrows and their mobility.

American UCAT put no limits on the quality and quantity of their explosives.

They poured in as much personnel as they could to push on through.

But that did not go as planned.

“What’s going on!? Our explosives aren’t as effective as they should be!”

The flying arrows pierced through the armored shield on the commander’s false arm.

“!?”

The three arrows sticking from him were made of wood.

The voice that escaped his throat was filled with more confusion than pain:

why?

His question was answered by his second-in-command who had taken one of the arrows to his shoulder.

“This is a concept of terrain protection! On natural terrain, the things closest to that terrain are more effective and anything unnaturally processed has its power rejected!”

“What kind of cheap fantasy story is this!?”

The commander scattered gunfire into the surrounding shadows to protect those following from behind.

“Are we overwriting the concept text to cancel it!?”

“We’re trying, but the large Kanda facility has to distribute their processing power elsewhere too.”

“But the enemy can focus on this battlefield, so we can’t overpower them, is that it!?”

Through the thinner parts of the dark forest, the commander saw new dolls arriving.

…They sure are persistent.

The dolls hit by their bullets would fall over but quickly get back up.

The metal bullets had a complex manufacturing process, so they caused little damage in this space.

The explosives and optical weaponry were the same.

“Dammit. Does this concept even affect conceptually strengthened concept weapons because they ‘aren’t natural’!?”

Each enemy might as well have been a solid wall and American UCAT’s defenses might as well have been made of paper.

And even just counting the ones they could see, there were more than one hundred dolls in the forest.

…How many of them are there in the mountains as a whole?

This was worrying and these dolls were not their only enemy. There had to be a main force as well.

“Dammit!”

The commander sprayed machinegun fire, but the bright sparks quickly vanished and the sound was absorbed by the forest.

Eventually, his ammunition belt ran out.

“Get me a reload! And have the following unit temporarily withdra-…”

He turned around to find his second-in-command was gone.

No, he was still there, but he had collapsed to the ground after taking an arrow to the front of both shoulders.

…Kh.

A moment later, someone shouted from behind them.

“Withdraw!! Get out of the forest!!”

At the same time, the commander felt a slight wind.

…!?

He turned just his head and saw a doll only twenty centimeters away.

By the time he wondered how it had gotten there, it wrapped an arm around his neck from behind.

That was when he realized that the dolls themselves were made of wood.

…They made them ecological to match this terrain!?

Their cooling, armor, mobility, and everything else was taken care of by the protection provided by the concept space's concept text.

Most likely, their actual design only included the bare minimum.

They had been carved down, given moving parts and controls, and then painted.

We're losing to them? thought the commander.

But his troops' concept weapons were useless against the dolls' conceptual defenses.

"Kh!"

The automaton's right hand shot up in front of him.

It held a black knife made of polished obsidian.

It was coming for his throat, but he took that instant to move.

His trained reflexes linked with his survival instincts.

"————!"

He sank down and forcibly grabbed the knife-wielding arm with his own right hand.

He then bent forward to lift up the slender form behind him.

He immediately flipped his lower back forward.

"Secret technique! One-Man Shoulder Throw!!"

He threw her to the right as if dropping her to the ground.

He had a lock on the doll's arm, so she could not escape.

As if he had swung a tree branch, she fell head-first in a completely vertical posture.

"Final blow!!"

He took something from his left hip and shoved it into the briefly upside-down doll's mouth.

It was two hundred grams of C4 explosive with a conceptual protection applied.

The protection simply caused it to detonate when a password was spoken.

While brushing off the automaton's chokehold and putting some distance between them, he gave a shout as soon as her head was going to strike the ground.

"Explosions are art!!"

She exploded.

A solid sound accompanied the doll being blasted into the sky instead of hitting the ground.

The force of the blast was far smaller than normal, but that was due to the concept space.

Still, it had definitely blown her away.

…Even if it is just one!

He grabbed the collar of his still-breathing second-in-command and tried to pull him to his feet, but then the airborne doll did something odd.

She had been sent upwards while upside-down, but she then bent both her knees forward.

The legs wrapped around a thick tree branch passing through the darkness above and she swung like a pendulum.

…Wha-?

The commander stared blankly upwards as the doll swung twice to build up speed.

"!"

And she jumped straight down.

She flipped around once in the few meters of space available, landed with her body turned to the side, and looked right at him.

He saw a scorch mark on her mouth as if blood was oozing out, but that was all.

"That didn't affect you!?"

As if to answer him, the doll shook her head and spat something onto the ground.

It was a single tooth made of wood.

The action seemed to be showing him how much it had affected her.

She was saying to thank her for taking that much damage.

Simply put, it had not affected her at all.

He gulped and confirmed something with his sense of hearing.

He could hear something, but it was not gunfire or shouting voices.

He heard a voiceless silence and soft footsteps approaching him through the underbrush.

Figures stood in the surrounding forest…no, in all of the darkness he could see.

These figures were not his fellow soldiers. They were all dolls wielding knives and bows and arrows.

Impossible, he thought. *All of my comrades were taken out?*

"We were hoping to make a successful assault, but we couldn't even act as a proper diversion…"

He clenched his teeth. The only upside was that the following unit had been able to withdraw.

But he picked up a machinegun lying on the ground.

He exhaled and did not bother wiping the sweat from his brow.

"I'm not going to lose here."

He was well aware the voiceless dolls were not going to reply.

"I may have no power, but I do have a will."

So…

“If I can lose with that, then this world is done for!!”

He knew it was not going to work, but he still raised the machinegun like it was some kind of ritual.

The dolls began to move at the same time.

They rushed toward him like a wind blowing through the forest.

The countless blades and flying points were trying to tear into his body, not his will.

It only lasted an instant.

Just as he prepared to squeeze the trigger, everything was swept away before his eyes.

“…!?”

It looked like a white gale, but…

…A shell!? No…

It was a train.

The high-speed train measured over two hundred meters long and it used its speed to become a high-speed shell and plow onto the battlefield, breaking through the conceptual protection on the way.

A shockwave raced by, trees were toppled, and the commander too was blown away in an instant.

But in that instant, he saw the train tearing into the ground, racing through the sounds of destruction as it fell on its side, and yet continuing on in the direction American UCAT had been trying to go.

“Ha ha…”

He stopped when he hit a tree and he laughed in the blowing wind.

He could see a mechanical dragon and a black god of war flying and repeatedly clashing in the sky.

The train was no longer visible, but he had noticed that the front car was partially destroyed.

He doubted it could carry its passengers all the way to Babel.

But that was enough.

Mountain climbing was best done on foot.

“Ha ha,” he laughed in the wind.

He could see twin lines of bent and twisted metal laid out along the path the train had taken.

He could not stop laughing when he saw that and he sat down at the base of a tree.

“So they laid a manmade track to decorate the path we made.”

He raised his voice while hoping it would ride the wind and reach them.

“Keep going, you bearers of strength!!”

●

The train stopped near a ridge in the western Mount Ikoma region.

Susahito Custom’s attack had kept Alex’s cannon blast from scoring a direct

hit, but the front car had still been knocked on its side, twisting the other cars in the process.

It had of course been the automatons who saved them when all of the cars were about to slam into the mountainous terrain.

They had fixed the track below the train like a sled, so the train had become a high-speed shell sliding along the slope and into the mountains.

After placing the cars gently on the mountain slope, the forty-two automatons were too overheated to move.

The front car was almost entirely destroyed.

The rest had had their armor destroyed and not a single window had survived.

However, the passengers were almost entirely unharmed.

They worked to carry the unmoving maids into the shadow of the train.

“Let’s go,” said Kazami as they all started up the slope.

If they crossed the ridge, it was all downhill from there. They would reach Babel in no time.

They had received a report saying American UCAT would regroup and follow the path they had created.

Also, American UCAT’s mechanical dragons had arrived and were crushing the dolls like tanks.

But when they reached the top of the ridge and looked down, they all saw a shadowy tower rising toward heaven in the vast night.

Below, a forest surrounded the tower, but that forest was broken by the slope they stood atop.

The rocky way down was about five hundred meters and there were enemies there.

The slope was covered in dolls and…

“The sky too,” said Sayama.

Indeed, a few dozen figures were visible in the sky.

They were dolls wearing black armored uniforms with black wings spread.

Izumo responded by resting his large Cowling Sword on his shoulder and saying the following:

“Even more dolls, huh? How many variations are there?”

“Ooshiro-san must be happy with this many dolls around.”

“I-I don’t like dolls that much.”

Hearing that, #8 turned toward Ooshiro and he gave a quiet shriek at the look in her eyes.

“Y-you are…different. Okay?”

“In other words, you hate me even more?”

“Y-you must not twist my words! I think you’re great! Yeah! You’re so great, #8-kun.”

“Testament.” #8 nodded. “In other words, you think being despised and beaten is ‘great’.”

“Is that all I am to people these days?”

They all made sure to ignore him.

That was when a voice reached them, carried up the mountain by the wind.

It was a female but deep voice.

“So you’re finally here.”

Kazami reacted before anyone else by adjusting X-Wi’s position on her back.

“…Jord!?”

“That’s right.”

She was standing halfway up the slope and a giant hammer-style weapon rested on her shoulder.

“I’m not really taking Top-Gear’s side, but there’s something I wanted to check on.”

She was looking at Izumo and Kazami.

“You aren’t going to be betraying any expectations, are you?”

“Don’t worry,” replied Izumo with a serious expression. “I meet her expectations every night.”

Kazami’s kick sent him flying through the air and that signaled the beginning.

As Izumo flew below the moonlight, the dolls reacted and the others from UCAT began to move.

The white army and the black army rushed forward like avalanches moving both up and down the slope.

“Ha ha ha. Hurry on down!”

Jord’s words rang through the surge of people and voices.

A moment later, she raised her giant hammer in the shadow cast by the tower behind her.

“If you’re too slow, the world is gonna change!!”

●

A small white underground room in UCAT contained a bed in the center with lights shining down on it from the ceiling. It was an operating room.

The tones of the EKG sounded quietly as the doctor closed the wound on the back lying on the bed and applied a charm.

Next to him, Tsukuyomi wore her development department lab coat.

She looked to the doctor with a few swords in hand.

“Well?”

The doctor hesitated to answer.

“I managed to close the wound, but…”

The lines coming from the EKG printer had reached the falling line.

The doctor looked to Tsukuyomi.

“I think she will last like this. She must be fighting with her own willpower. To be honest, it’s a miracle she’s holding on like this.”

“Will she recover on her own?”

“No. The name concept is like a linchpin. It was applied under the effects of the Concept Core, so it will continue to carve into her life. If we could stop that,

then we could make her life whole again, but…”

The doctor trailed off and lowered his head.

“I apologize. You already know all this.”

“Yeah.” Tsukuyomi nodded and looked around with the swords in hand. “From here on, it’s a concept battle. We have to see how much people can fight against the world of 2nd-Gear.”

She looked at the sleeping girl, at Shinjou’s closed eyes.

The EKG was beeping.

It was a quiet sound, but it was proof that the girl was fighting against that world.

“That girl always does give her very best effort.”

Tsukuyomi nodded and tension filled her face.

“I’m going to begin now, but call someone for me. …The world’s most powerful witch should be here. I could use someone that skilled with spells.”

●

Kazami and Izumo faced Jord.

Kazami was in the air and Izumo on the ground.

Kazami had just destroyed a few dolls and their fellow UCAT members had just vanished into the forest below.

Izumo had just stopped Jord’s hammer with his white Cowling Sword and put some distance between them.

Jord took a large step back and spoke while catching her breath.

“So dolls aren’t enough, are they?”

“No, they aren’t.” Kazami looked down at Izumo. “Even if they have the conceptual protection of the terrain, their joints still use wires and oil for smooth movement. If you cut them in just the right spot, they’ll lose their balance and fall.”

To do that, one had to keep up with their speed or be able to block their attacks.

Kazami and Izumo could do one or the other of those, so the dolls were keeping their distance.

Jord shrugged.

“I see. So dolls really aren’t enough. …I thought you might have been relying on the Concept Cores, but it looks like you can actually fight pretty well yourselves.”

“You’re not bad without a Concept Core yourself.”

Kazami heard Izumo speak casually to his grandmother, but Jord only lightly replied, “That’s right.”

In that instant, Kazami realized the sounds of wings and thus the winged dolls had moved away.

The dolls on the surface had also moved far away from Jord.

…What are they doing?

Worried by how the dolls quickly moved several hundred meters away, Kazami asked a question.

“What are you going to do?”

“Something simple. I’m just going to show you how stubborn 10th-Gear can be.”

She raised the giant hammer with only her right arm and she smiled with one eye shut.

“Do you know what Concept Core weapon 10th-Gear made before making Gungnir?”

Kazami frowned because this was something Izumo had only just told her the night before.

“Thor’s Hammer…”

“Right.” Jord nodded. “This is it right here. I picked it up from the reservation on the way here, so I’m going to see for myself just how you two will oppose a god!”

She then swung down the hammer.

When it crashed into the rocky slope and produced a metallic noise, Kazami heard a voice.

- **—Abilities are reversed.**

At the same time, she saw her wings pick up speed in a certain direction: down.

“…!?”

Her wings of flight were now powering her fall.

Before she could even gasp, she crashed into the rocky slope.

●

Izumo saw Kazami fall toward the rocks.

She fell back-first, where her wings were.

Cautious of Jord, she had moved lower, so the fall happened almost instantly.

“Chisato!”

He ran over, but he was not going to make it in time.

…Dammit!

She fell about five meters and she had lost her balance due to X-Wi, but he doubted she would mess up and fall on her head.

She hit the ground as he ran over.

“Ouch!”

That shout proved she was not too badly hurt.

Once he arrived, she placed her hands on her lower back while lying on the ground.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow…”

“A-are you okay, Chisato! Is it your butt!? Does your butt hurt!? What a

naughty butt! I may have to confiscate it! Like this!? Like this, right!? O-or is your butt just unspeakably naughty!?”

“The problem isn’t my butt! It’s your head!!”

Her fist flew, but…

“Huh?”

She never reached him and her fist swished harmlessly through empty air.

X-Wi lay between her back and the ground and the metal backpack had pulled her down.

She could not get up from the ground.

“…?”

She raised her arms and swung them around, but X-Wi did not follow her movements or even budge.

It almost seemed glued down.

“What is going on?”

She looked over her shoulder toward X-Wi and Izumo tilted his head.

“Did it get heavier?”

He reached for X-Wi himself and it easily moved. If he subtracted Kazami’s own weight from the weight he felt, X-Wi had to be about three kilograms.

“It’s not heavy at all?”

“B-but it’s really, really heavy.”

“No, that isn’t it.”

He let go of X-Wi and thought for a moment.

“Your special ability ‘Kong Power’ has been reversed.”

“How can you be so mean to a girl!?”

“Hey, calm down, Chisato. Think about this positively. This means your power comes from a kind of divine protection instead of from you. In other words, your Kong isn’t actually yours.”

“Oh, you’re right.”

Her face brightened and she gave a sigh of relief.

“Now I don’t have to be synonymous with school violence anymore.”

I have one hell of a girlfriend, don’t I? he thought as a strange feeling filled his heart.

Kazami then gathered strength in her abs to sit up.

“Nn.”

She failed to sit up, but she kept trying.

“Nnnn.”

It looked hopeless.

She sucked in air, sprawled out on the ground, and swung her legs to build up momentum.

“Nhhhhh.”

But she still could not get up.

Izumo watched as she flailed her limbs with more grunts of “nwah” or “nn”.

…Damn. This is pretty nice.

“H-hey, Kaku, h-help me out a bit.”

“Sure,” he said as he cheerfully started removing her skirt.

“What are you doing!? We’re in the middle of a battle right now!”

“Calm down, Chisato,” he said as Kazami stopped moving. “My special ability ‘Adolescence 2005’ must have been reversed, too. That means I’m doing this with a pure heart. I am dedicating my life to keeping a pure hart.”

“Then that dedication is about to end.”

She swung her arms and legs, but she could not get up and thus could not reach him.

“Ah. Hey. Kh. Hit him.”

Watching her flail around helplessly calmed Izumo’s heart.

…Wow, this is just amazing.

He thought to himself while watching her struggle like a small animal.

…I need to keep trying tomorrow, too.

Suddenly, she got her hips up and forced a kick which hit him on the right arm.

It was a much more powerless kick than usual.

…That’s clearly not going to hurt or send me fly-

“-ing?”

A moment later, he made five and a half flips and crashed into the ground.

The impacts and pain reached him directly.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow! What was that, Chisato!? You’ve got plenty of power!”

“N-no, I don’t!” he heard her say. “Your divine protection has been reversed!”

The damage he took was being multiplied by as much as it would normally be reduced.

“Seriously?”

He clenched his teeth and looked to their enemy.

Jord was smoking a cigarette ten meters away and the hammer was resting on her shoulder.

“Well, humans? Do you get it now?” She blew smoke from the twisted corner of her mouth. “All abilities are reversed right now. Even the ones people use to fight. Now, a question. It’s a nice question because it has a nice answer. So listen. …Can you tell me what my ability was originally?”

Izumo and Kazami exchanged a glance.

After looking at Kazami’s wrinkled brow, he turned back to Jord.

They both gulped and answered in unison.

“Not acting your age?”

“You people don’t make things easy, do you!?” Jord raised the hammer. “Met expectations. Everything will go exactly how I want it to! That is the power of a god!!”

Chapter 3

“In the Direction You Are Headed”

Please wish for your power
Please lady
Please get ready

●

The mountainous region was being destroyed.

The sounds of breaking came from the running and shooting of four-legged mechanical beasts.

They were American UCAT's blue mechanical dragons and they made their way through the forest and mountains.

The twelve of them were split into groups of three as they ran west through the eastern Mount Ikoma region.

They were transforming models, but they were set up and equipped with a focus on close-quarters combat.

Twelve others in the air had the opposite settings and they were engaging Alex in battle.

They had not yet made it past the mid-section of the mountains.

Mechanical dragons would normally fly down from the sky to fight on land, but they could be shot down by the dolls' high-flying arrows if they flew past the mid-section.

Also, the entrance to Top-Gear's concept space had been set to the east. If they tried to enter from any other direction, the change to their string vibration would be too great and they would be unable to enter.

The closest area to Babel that allowed for a stable string vibration was on the eastern side, so they had determined the route across the mountains was a trap set by Top-Gear.

Still, they had to cross the mountains, so Japanese UCAT had broken through.

And American UCAT was supporting them.

They attacked the enemies pursuing Japanese UCAT and guarded the route to and back from Babel.

They had considered using long-distance cruise missiles, but Alex and Tatsumi could shoot down any flying objects and the missiles would only provide localized destruction due to the conceptual protection placed across the battlefield.

The most effective method was pushing through on the surface and the mechanical dragons did just that.

The four groups of three began their forest-crushing charge from the position the vanguard had desperately reached.

One of those four groups was further ahead than the others.

That group travelled along the cleared path Japanese UCAT had created in the forest.

With the mechanical dragons out front, they rushed straight forward at an average speed of sixty kilometers per hour.

They were focused on speed.

The dragons' front armor was sturdy, but it broke away as stones and arrows were thrown or fired faster than sound.

The other three groups moved through the forest at an average speed of

around twenty kilometers per hour both to draw the enemy's attention and to create a path.

But the speedier group using the train track did not worry about its own destruction.

The three dragons formed a rotation, so whenever the front-most dragon's damage reached a certain level, another one would take its place.

They were followed by a high-mobility unit riding armored cars and modified motorcycles.

There was no road, only the stomped down earth.

Visibility was poor this late at night.

They raced onwards through a downpour of enemy attacks.

But they had a reason for going to all this trouble.

A motorcycle was following their unit and a girl was clinging to it.

Her short blonde hair shook with the motorcycle's movements and her arms were wrapped around the waist of the boy driving it.

"H-Harakawa! I think you're breaking the speed limit!! This is illegal!"

"Listen, Heo. Do you see a speed limit posted in these mountains?"

A moment later, the motorcycle tore into some rocks and hopped into the air.

Harakawa lifted the front wheel and balanced the vehicle. He also swung his head to avoid an arrow flying in from the forest to their side.

"We need to get there soon. Those idiots decided to take a train here for their school trip even though there isn't a station anywhere."

They resumed their charge forward as soon as they landed.

Heo bounced up from the back seat, but Harakawa did not look back.

He simply sent the motorcycle forward while throwing dirt behind them.

Armored cars and motorcycles covered them on either side, to the front, and behind.

The mechanical dragons in the lead did not slow.

Harakawa suddenly sensed movement in the forest.

There was a presence there.

The dolls were running through the forest and they pressed in on the air as they approached.

Based on the amount of wind, there had to be a large army of them. The dolls meant for the other mechanical dragons had to have been sent here, too.

One of the motorcycle drivers behind them spoke.

"Dammit!! They're all after us!"

"Yeah," said the man in the passenger/gunner seat of an armored car. "This shows they know what really matters."

They aimed their weapons toward the wall of wind pressing in from the left and right and they glanced toward Heo.

"That's right. What really matters is a love of little girls!!"

"Wh-when did America become so influenced by Japan!?"

"Didn't I tell you, Heo Thunderson? It's contagious."

However, the overwhelming pressure in the air rapidly approached.

The mechanical dragons ahead of Harakawa slowed down when they noticed, but they would not be able to turn around in time.

The swelling of the air seemed to surround the back end of the unit.

“Here they come!!”

Harakawa saw them “spill out”.

They did not simply “appear”.

White-skinned dolls poured from the edge of the forest as if they were being pushed out.

But that was not all.

From the sides and up above, the charging and flying dolls came from the darkness in triple digit numbers.

There were enough of them to blanket the area.

“————”

But Harakawa heard gunfire from close by.

Most of it was directed towards the dolls flying from the sky or charging in at them.

However, the bullets could only hold them back. Even if a lucky shot snapped or crushed the wires, others would crush their fellow dolls underfoot and keep coming.

And what were they after?

“Protect the inspector!!” someone shouted.

All of the armored cars and motorcycles pressed in toward Harakawa’s motorcycle.

He raced forward with the machine’s full acceleration and the others moved along with him as if using their speed to evade.

Heo spoke up while clinging to Harakawa’s waist.

“Wh-why are they doing this for me?” She was half in tears. “I don’t have any power right now!”

Harakawa did not respond.

That was for the others to answer.

“You have no power?” said one man while taking an arrow to the right shoulder. “That’s not true. It’s not. And…”

“Yeah,” said someone else while his motorcycle hopped up from the vibration of the rough ground. “Can’t we be your power, American UCAT Inspector?”

They all attacked.

They all fortified their defenses.

They all continued racing forward.

They all strengthened their resolve.

They all began to yell.

“There’s one thing we refused to get rid of during the Revolutionary War.”

“Oh, I know what that is. The idea of ‘ladies first’, right?”

“So let’s show her our strength, boys.”

“These out-of-place wooden ladies are approaching our princess.”

“And being a wall is a bodyguard’s job.”

“We don’t ask for any previous experience. The only qualities you need to work for our escort service is a body that won’t let a magnum round through.”

“Hey,” one of them shouted to Harakawa while spraying bullets everywhere. “Hurry! Getting her to the battlefield isn’t our job. Neither is taking her hand for the dance on the battlefield!”

Harakawa did not reply.

He simply sped up.

The wall of dolls on either side was thinning out.

…Can we lose them?

The surrounding men slowly spread out.

They were holding their positions and telling him and Heo to continue on.

He responded by twisting the accelerator as far as it would go.

Immediately, he felt Heo trembling behind him.

“Harakawa!”

Something arrived at the same time as her voice.

With no wind this time, many more dolls spilled from the forest on the left and right

“!?”

The previous dolls had been a diversion. They had put pressure on them all to push Harakawa and Heo out ahead.

And these new dolls had been lying in wait for them.

The men tried to rush back in after having spread out, but the dolls would not allow it. They pursued and fired arrows to hold the men in place.

Meanwhile, the new group spilled out between the mechanical dragons and Harakawa’s motorcycle.

Their joints clattered as they slowly but immediately ran out.

“————!”

The dolls rushed in and their relative speeds quickly eliminated the distance between them.

Harakawa did not have time to pull out his rifle.

Heo quietly called for Thunder Fellow, but nothing appeared.

“Please!”

Harakawa heard her shout.

For the first time in a while, she was speaking from her heart and it seemed to control the movements of the attack.

“Someone…someone please let me through!!”

The dignified ring of her voice seemed to break through the wind and Harakawa saw her request being answered.

The dolls rushing in from either side up ahead were blasted into the sky.

“…!?”

He widened his eyes in surprise and a few motorcycles pulled up alongside his

own.

He and Heo looked back.

“Is that Japan’s high-mobility company that was sent in after us!?”

●

Heo looked to them.

They were from western Japan and the concept space’s only entrance was to the east, so they had been late to arrive.

They spread out to protect American UCAT’s motorcycles and armored cars.

Heo noticed they all had mohawks, wore hockey masks, or were tattooed skinheads. More than just off-road motorcycles, they also rode buggies and three-wheeled bikes.

They fired wooden arrows from their bow guns and burned the dolls with flamethrowers powered by natural fuel.

“Hyahaaaahhh!!”

One of the mohawked men stood on his motorcycle and thrust out his chest.

“Tottori UCAT’s Sand Dune Regiment at your service!”

“Oh!” shouted all the newcomers in agreement.

“The year is 2005! The power of depopulation is shrinking our prefecture and the number of pachinko parlors is growing!”

“But the mohawks and bike shops have not died out!”

More dolls appeared to oppose them, but the maids were swept away as soon as the men focused on them.

Wondering what had happened, Heo saw several figures running through the darkness.

Men wearing mountain-climbing armored uniforms threw reinforcing charms around their bodies to catch up to the motorcycles. They were all leaning forward and running.

“We are Shizuoka UCAT’s Fuji Regiment. This mountain is nothing compared to the Sea of Trees. How about we clear a path for you?”

More men ran up from behind them.

“You morons from Shizuoka! Mount Fuji belongs to our Yamanashi!”

“What are you talking about? Sacred Mount Fuji belongs to all of Japan. … Even if it is too contaminated to become a world heritage site.”

Even though they said it themselves, the men from Shizuoka and Yamanashi UCAT gave disappointed sighs.

Heo spoke to them while bouncing up from the motorcycle.

“U-um…”

“Hmmm? What is it, missss? I can’t hear youuuu- gefah!”

After a mohawked man punched that hockey mask man, another man turned her way with a helmet that draped decorative cloth over his shoulders.

With his sharp gaze turned her way, he stuck a hand in his pocket.

“Um, I am the commander of the Sand Dune Regiment. Um, this is my

business card. If you, well, look in the corner, you can see the glow-in-the-dark skull, right? Cute, isn't it? …Anyway, um, do you have any business for…no, do you have a request for us, American Inspector."

"Eh? Um, uh."

"Men, uhhhhh!!"

The men repeated the man's shout.

"Uhhhhhhh!!!!!"

"N-no, not that."

"Men, not that!!"

"Not thaaaaat!!!!!"

"Ah, no, p-please wait a bit!!"

"Men, slam on the brakes just a bit!!"

"Slamming on the braaaaakes!"

"N-no!!" shouted Heo.

Once they fell silent, she then looked across them.

They all silently ran, threw dolls through the air, burnt them, tore into them, did other things to them, and yet continued looking directly at her.

And she finally said what she needed to say.

"Thank you for your cooperation."

And…

"Please do whatever you can."

She lowered her head in a bow and received a single response.

"Testament!!"

They all moved forward.

"Hyahaaahhh! Let's go, you bastards!"

The motorcycles and armored cars had become a metal cavalry and they raced up the mountain as if pulled by the mechanical dragons.

The speeding men accelerated even further.

Even as they smashed stone, sent dirt spraying upwards, and continued their rampage through the night, Heo felt like they were somehow supporting her heart.

"Harakawa… Do you go on motorcycle rampages like this a lot?"

"This is a special case, Heo Thunderson. This is on the level of the movie Mad Max."

"Oh, I wasn't allowed to see that because it was a 'delinquent movie'."

The wind seemed to carry Heo through the battle.

She could see the way ahead.

Past the mechanical dragons, she saw the mountain peak, the ridge, and the night sky.

Their destination was close.

But then she saw a pale light descending from the sky.

…Is that…?

It collided with the ground directly in front of the dragons.

“!!”

Heo was not the only one to see what happened next.

They all saw the dragon in the lead fly several dozen meters into the air.

A single strike had done that.

The sound came afterwards: the twisting of metal and someone’s shouted voice.

“It’s Typhon!!”

Six white wings spread out in the center of her vision.

A white giant stared down the other two mechanical dragons and a girl stood on its shoulder.

The first dragon fell from the sky.

It tried to brace for the impact, but the twisted backbone of its frame would not allow it.

The girl on the god of war’s shoulder looked down at the blue dragon as its back crashed into the earth.

“A valiant effort,” she said. “But it’s too late. Can’t you see it? Can’t you hear it?”

She waved a hand toward the heavens and the giant shadowy tower rising into the night sky.

But the shadows were vanishing.

“It’s covered in light!”

“Yes,” said the girl on Typhon’s shoulder. “Can’t you feel it? Babel is activating as Noah!!”

Those words were followed by a great noise.

It sounded like the shattering of glass stretched out to eternity.

It grew higher in pitch and quickly left the audible range, but light was created in response.

Light raced across the tower like veins on a leaf.

The blue light pulsated.

The pattern of light was imperfect and there were gaps in places.

A voice could be heard behind the glowing tower.

“Twenty-five more minutes. Once that light fills in, Noah will fully activate and the concept creation will be complete. And once the resurrection philosopher’s stone is complete, Shino will be brought back to life…and who knows what will happen to the world. Maybe people will begin to fight over that power.”

“We won’t let you-…”

“You don’t have to let us. …We will make sure we can. And what’s wrong with bringing a single girl back to life? I think that’s enough to justify driving the world insane. And if you disagree…”

Her voice rang out.

“Then how about we get started?”

●

Sayama ran through the forest.

It was a dark forest. Instead of a conifer forest created through afforestation, it was a broadleaf forest native to the country.

The broad leaves almost entirely hid the sky, but the glimpses of the sky he could see were filled with light.

This was not starlight or moonlight.

Blue pulsating light ascended as if pushing back the darkness of the sky.

…The light of Babel, hm?

"According to the report I received, it should fully activate in about another twenty…one minutes."

A voice responded when he spoke his thoughts aloud.

It was #8 who ran alongside him in her maid uniform with four long coolers floating around her.

"I have determined the world would begin to fight over a resurrection philosopher's stone. And Sayama-sama…"

A few other maids ran with her and Sayama realized she was looking his way.

He understood why.

"Are you curious about Georgius?"

"Testament."

She nodded and looked away.

He wore the left and right Georgiuses on his hands.

The gauntlets were glowing. A blue light surrounded the "+" chip on the back of one and a red light surrounded the "-" chip on the back of the other.

The light pulsated with the same timing as the light on Babel's surface.

The shattering glass sound coming from Babel caused Georgius itself to vibrate just a bit.

…Are they calling each other so they can synchronize?

As he wondered that, dolls appeared from the forest on the right.

They responded with neither attack nor defense.

#8 simply raised her hand.

One of the maids holding guns and blades responded to the small gesture.

With a bow, she grabbed her skirt and moved boldly toward the dozen or so dolls.

That was all the maids did to fight back.

Gunfire and explosions shook the air behind them.

"Are you not going to let me see their efforts, #8-kun?"

"Think of it as cleaning up the battlefield, Sayama-sama. While our master is taking an enjoyable hike in the mountains, we happened across some trash, so we are disposing of it such that it will not spoil the view for our master."

"And will your master, oblivious to your efforts, comment that the mountain is so clean and beautiful?"

"Testament. I have determined that we need nothing more than to see our master's good mood. Any job to that end is not work. Just like preparing food, it

is a necessary action.”

#8 smiled, but she did not look at him.

She instead raised her left hand toward the enemy wind approaching from the left.

“We were originally meant to help people in their everyday lives. Specifically, 3rd-Gear’s people.”

Sayama noticed a slight pause in her words.

He decided she had to be calling out to the others over their shared memory.

And then her voice began again without ever stopping her forward movement.

“But what can I say? 3rd-Gear was destroyed in a way that erased its skies, its land, and even its history with not even dust remaining. The next thing we knew, we were messing with machines below the earth of the lowest Gear.”

She raised both hands.

The last two maids accompanying her bowed and leaped toward the forest on the left and right.

However, she showed no concern.

“I have determined that maintaining one’s existence truly is a ‘battle’.”

Sayama listened.

“Yes. Maintaining one’s existence is a never-ending battle against the question of ‘what to do now?’ That is my interpretation of the current situation.”

She asked the empty air, her fellow maids, and Sayama a question.

“What do you think? Do you enjoy this constant battle of not knowing what the future holds?”

If so…

“Then as we automatons try to maintain our existence, we will rejoice in this battle and its enjoyment, amusement, and pleasure. I am able to determine that, even without emotions, dolls are born to fight in this excellent battle.”

Sayama heard her call his name.

At the same time, the end of the forest came into view.

The bright night could be seen beyond the darkness.

That brightness came from the moonlight, the starlight, and…

“Babel’s light.”

“Sayama-sama,” called #8 again. “Do you enjoy not knowing what the future holds?”

He did not answer her question.

There was only one thing on his mind: Shinjou as she fought her fatal wound back at UCAT.

Could he say he enjoyed not knowing whether she would survive?

But #8 said more.

“Then, Sayama-sama.”

She seemed to be changing the subject.

“Would you enjoy losing here without gaining any kind of future?”

That question gave him a few different thoughts and he spoke the greatest of

those.

"Thank you, #8-kun."

She had moved out ahead and he could only see her back, but he still spoke to her as he ran.

He clenched both fists.

"I have recovered a little bit."

"I have emotionlessly determined that is a delightful thing, Sayama-sama."

"Yes, that is right. If we do not win here and end this, I will not be able to see Shinjou-kun again either way. And…"

He sighed before continuing.

"Even if she does die, Shinjou-kun will still be wonderful."

"Testament. I have determined you treat life and death equally."

"Thank you," he said.

He knew why #8 was concerned. He had received a report on the way here.

Ooki had told him that the name "Mikoku" had yet to be removed from Shinjou's wound.

Tsukuyomi had tried to cut it with an exorcising blade and to crush it with a barrier, but nothing had worked.

They had considered cutting it with 2nd-Gear's Concept Core, but Shinjou's life would not last long enough for them to retrieve it and return.

Diana had apparently joined the surgery, but they had made no progress.

Even with the help of the development department and the world's most powerful witch, there was nothing they could do.

Still, he could only leave it to them. He did not know how they could remove the life-carving concept, but he could only trust in them.

He had to fight here, so that was not his territory.

…Do not worry.

He trusted that Shinjou was fighting too.

According to the transmission records, her heartrate had been dropping, but that had suddenly improved, even if just a little. They suspected that her will was trying to fight back against the concept restraining her.

That would not heal her, but it would buy some time.

He urged her to keep fighting, but held that thought in his heart and spoke to #8.

"It seems I was worrying you."

"Think nothing of it. A doll soothes those crying fearfully in the night by being held in their arms, but an automaton takes a more active role."

She may have been hesitant to continue because she lowered her head a bit.

"It simply seems you do not wish that of us."

"That is because I have Shinjou-kun."

"Then…could we act as a replacement for Shinjou-sama?"

"You could not." He replied immediately, breathed in, and saw the forest's exit growing larger. "There is only one Shinjou-kun. Just like there is only one of

each of you. None of you can replace any of the others. And if you could replace each other…then wouldn't everyone be the same and wouldn't things be a lot less interesting?"

"Testament."

She gave a powerful but small nod.

At the same time, they ran out into the moonlight.

And on that grassy field, they saw…

"Babel!"

#8 looked up at it, but Sayama did not.

It was here yet not here.

They had entered the concept space in which Babel existed. Instead of a mere shadow, it was now a solid tower.

"So that is the ark skewered into the earth!"

#8 turned toward his voice and spoke.

"Running an acoustic scan of its surface." She spent one second in expressionless thought. "There is a single open entrance. I wonder why."

"Because I am their guest," said Sayama. "They are letting me in. I would have done the same thing. This is a battle between Low-Gear and Top-Gear, after all."

"But they are not you. They are-…"

"They are the same."

He ran up alongside her.

The tower rising into the sky revealed its white form. They were about two hundred meters away.

"She and I are the same. She has chosen life and is thus working to create an undying world while I have chosen death and am thus working to create a desperate world. That is the only difference between us."

#8's expression briefly vanished as she turned toward his words, but she soon smiled.

"You are 'only' creating different worlds? …How are you feeling right now?"

He thought, but chose the following words:

"It is true I have stopped crying."

Now he only had something else.

"I have brought an end to the tears and am wondering just one thing: what to do now?"

For some reason, #8's expression softened at that and he saw her hang her head a bit.

"____"

But she soon faced forward and away from him.

Noise reached them almost immediately.

It came from the forest.

Humanoid shapes poured from the entirety of the forest surrounding the field.

It was like a wave, like a fog.

The sound was the clattering of their joints and their speed was swift.

Dolls approached while displaying all kinds of hostility, so Sayama spoke.

“#8-kun, you break through and then return. I can shake free of them if they pursue me because I have memorized the general layout of Babel’s interior. So you go on, #8-kun. I will be fine.”

“No.”

He heard her produce single word and a slight laugh as she turned back toward him.

“Were you unable to predict that answer because you do not know what the future holds?”

“Yes. …It was most enjoyable.”

“Then let me tell you what will happen,” she said. “I will protect this place. I will protect the mansion my master is visiting. I will hold off the poorly-trained guard dogs attempting to pursue him into the mansion.”

He no longer objected to her words and he said something else instead as he ran.

“I appreciate it.”

“Testament. I have determined I am very glad to hear it. …And we just passed twenty minutes until Noah fully activates. Please do your very best during the next nineteen minutes.”

With those words, she turned around. She circled around him to face behind him while keeping her back to him and her face away from him.

She grabbed her skirt, spun around, and whipped up the wind with the returning heel of her pumps.

Meanwhile, Sayama accelerated toward Babel and toward the open and waiting entrance.

●

#8 brought her legs to a stop while picking up running footsteps with her hearing devices.

The Sayama ringing in her devices was still not his usual self.

But, she determined. *There is more to humans than the hardware.*

…They also have a will.

“So…he will be fine.”

She then faced forward.

Dolls rushed in from the front…no, from every direction. They were remotely controlled with some level of autonomous support and they wielded bows and blades.

They were all pursing Sayama.

“I have determined they are the enemy.”

She glanced through them and immediately swung both arms.

The components of two American heavy machineguns appeared from up her sleeves and below her apron.

The weapons instantly came together and floated below her hands.

However, the rushing dolls were not deterred by that.

They were prepared to trample #8 and continue after Sayama even if a few of them were destroyed in the process.

Their racing footsteps shook the earth without end.

But #8 gave a shout.

“Grand oooooopening!!”

With those words, the lids flew from the coolers floating next to her.

The contents stood up and out of the coolers.

“Testament!!”

They were automatons and there were two to a box.

Counting #8, there were now nine of them.

They all prepared heavy machineguns, anti-tank guns, and bazookas in both hands.

“We will protect you!”

Countless handguns and knives floated up into the air once they were built and cocked.

Each automaton had a heavy firearm in each hand, sixteen handguns, and eight knives.

With #8’s included, there were eighteen heavy firearms, one hundred forty four handguns, and seventy two knives.

The collection of bullets and blades slowly circled around #8’s group like summer clouds.

“I believe this is enough to rival an army, but what do you think?”

She nodded.

After instantly transforming herself into a light fortress, she looked around her surroundings.

The floating coolers swung around in accordance with the movements of her head and the two automatons in each one aimed their weapons in different directions.

Meanwhile, the dolls had stopped moving.

That was why #8 swung both her arms as if embracing her own body.

That movement sent out the heavy machineguns floating below her hands.

The ends of the barrels tore into the dirt and moved left and right to draw a circle.

The two guns rapidly drew a great ring around Babel.

The gliding machineguns finished their circular restraint of the dolls in only seven seconds.

Once they had whipped up the wind and returned to #8’s outstretched hands, they had drawn a perfect circle in the large field.

No one moved until #8 broke the stillness by taking a step forward.

The bullets, blades, and eight companions who could rival an army followed her forward and she looked to the circle drawn by the gun barrels.

“We will eradicate anyone who steps over this line.”

She raised her fingertips, stepped on the large circle below, and opened her mouth.

“It is winter. The flower that blossoms at the world’s destruction will wither away at the world’s birth, but we will mow down any flower that does not wish to be replanted after losing a place to wither.”

She raised her head, looked straight at the enemy, and transmitted her words over her shared memories.

“Let us go, automatons. You flowers who were replanted in this world.”

“It is calling. It is calling. Our master’s praise is calling.”

“More important than the sound of our own activation, our master’s praise is calling.”

“The essence of a flower is to never compromise and to keep its thoughts hidden even when picked up and held.”

“The flower is steel. As stainless steel, its blooming thoughts know no rust.”

“If moderation is preserved, the data tells us this emotionless flower will forever blossom.”

“We are eternal snowflakes that only melt at the blessing received by trusting in our master’s thanks.”

“Go, and a flower will be waiting. So let us go, maid automatons.”

“The bouquet of thanks cannot be acquired alone.”

“Nor can it be sent anywhere alone. It is waiting at the cutting edge of our activation.”

#8 sent her song-like words to the others and closed her eyes only for a moment.

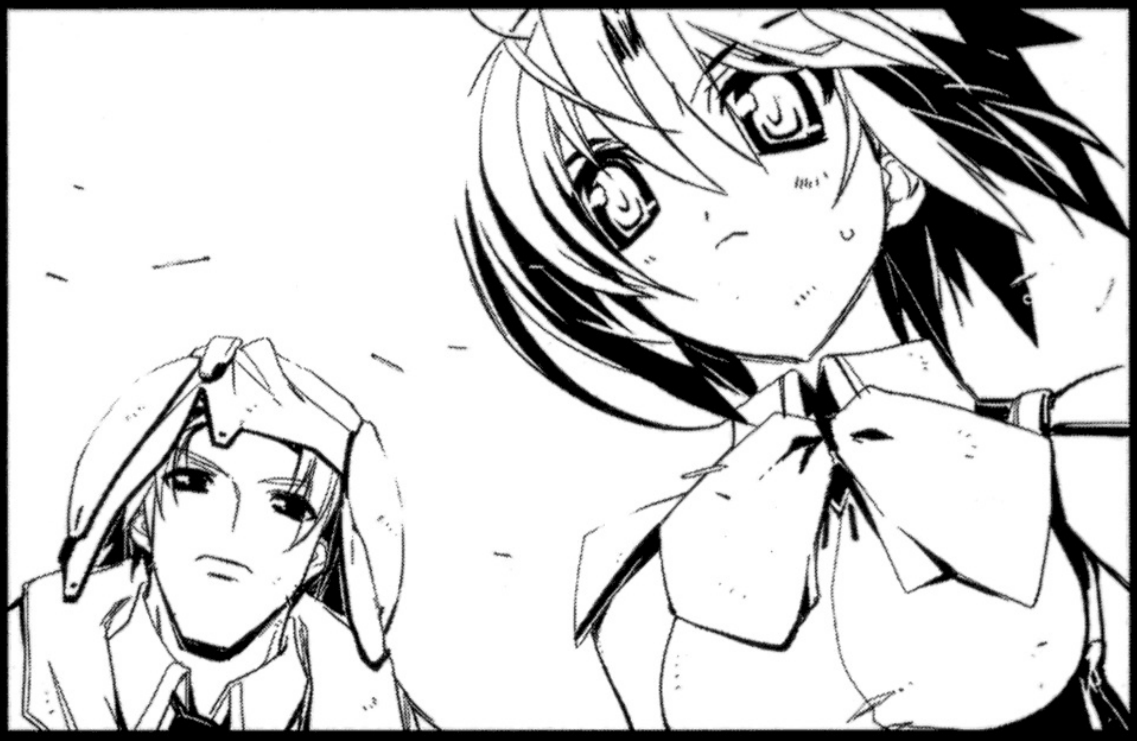
“It is waiting!!”

The very next moment, she sent all her strength toward what her opened eyes saw.

And she poured all of her thanks into it.

Chapter 4

“Reason for Defeat”



The corner of hope
Which simply yells how much it hurts
Wants much, much more

●

Kazami responded to Jord's movement by running along the slope.

She ran as fast as she could.

X-Wi had always been her lifeline during a battle, but she had removed the straps and left it on the ground. After all, it now had the amazing ability of transforming "flying" into "falling", so it was completely useless.

And at the moment, she was incredibly helpless.

She doubted she could even lift the spear she had brought with her, so it too was abandoned on the ground as nothing more than an obstacle between her and Jord.

Her armored uniform was also very heavy.

On that note, Izumo had removed her skirt earlier and now wore it on his head as armor.

…Why protect his head when his brain is already a lost cause?

She did not understand why she still had her speed even though her strength was gone.

Her equipment felt heavy, but her body did not.

Similarly, Izumo's defenses had been reversed, but he could still lift things and run.

It seemed only their special abilities had been reversed.

…In that case, the strength I can use now is what's actually mine.

She could act as something like a diversion.

She could only say "something like a" because she had no attack power.

A diversion that could not attack could not draw their opponent's attention.

And sure enough, Jord was focused on Izumo and trying to hit him.

However, there was a way of drawing Jord's attention without attacking.

"————!!"

She ran right in front of Jord as the woman was attacking.

She put herself between Jord and Izumo to hide the boy from her.

She jumped to place herself at Jord's eye level and interfered with her attack.

And…

"!!"

She performed a midair side-flip to avoid Jord's attack.

Blocking her view would delay her attack. Not seeing how her opponent reacted prevented her from attacking in the optimal position.

It was Izumo's job to attack, so he swung down his large sword.

"Ohhhh!!"

It drew a large downward arc, but…

"I hope that doesn't hit me."

With Jord's words, it failed to hit.

The thick blade was swinging straight toward Jord from head-on, but it only tore at empty air.

It should have hit, but it did not.

…It's been reversed.

Jord's original concept had been "betrayed expectations". Everything others expected of her would not happen.

But that ability had been reversed.

…Her own expectations come true.

If she wished "let there be light", light would appear there.

She even did exactly that.

She swung her hand and casually fired light from it to deflect Izumo's sword as he raised it again.

"…!"

With the sound of crumbling sand, the light fell apart and vanished.

But in that instant, the vanishing light fell on the surrounding area like frost and froze Izumo's sword.

That light would freeze anything it hit.

"Now, how does it feel to face a god? You aren't doing a very good job of holding your own."

"Gods these days sure talk a lot even without an oracle," replied Kazami while feeling a little out of breath.

She turned toward Izumo who was a step behind her.

"Kaku, are you okay?"

Even a minor hit would be fatal to him right now and she did not want a repeat of what had happened in the past.

"Don't do anything too reckless, okay?"

"Don't worry," he said calmly. "I'll keep my usual spot where I can adore your butt."

He looked down at her skirtless butt.

"Everything is okay."

"What are you talking about?"

Her armored uniform was a full-body suit, so removing the skirt only revealed the lower layer of the suit.

But it was true this area was normally hidden.

…You don't have to point out that you can see it.

But it's okay. You're wearing defensive stockings and you've trained enough to have a perfect silhouette.

After reassuring herself, she looked forward.

She looked to Jord.

That woman could do anything that matched her expectations and they had yet to get a single attack in on her.

However, they had yet to be hit by any of her attacks either.

With that in mind, Kazami breathed in.

Abilities are reversed in this space, she thought.

…What does that mean?

She frowned at this sudden question in her heart.

She felt she had to have overlooked a few things about the reversed abilities.

And…

“——————”

She realized a certain fact and frantically hid her expression so Jord would not notice what she was thinking.

She quickly stood tall, kept her cool, and glanced at Izumo behind her.

“Well, I guess we’ll manage somehow.”

“That’s right,” she agreed.

…We might be able to pull this off somehow.

She then sank down, opened her mouth toward Jord, and gathered her resolve.

“I’ll go first.”

Jord frowned.

“Are you insane?”

“Who knows,” she said with a smile on the corner of her mouth. “But let me tell you one weakness of your expectations.”

That weakness was…

“Even a god can only think about one thing at a time. You can only hold one expectation in your head at once. So let me tell you something else.”

She raised her hips and leaned forward.

“I’ll go first, so you had better *prepare the expectation you need to defeat me*.”

With those words, she launched her body forward.

She ran.

She began the seven meter dash to Jord and she heard Izumo running behind her.

●

Jord held the hammer close in on her upper right.

Kazami ran in first, closely followed by Izumo.

She more or less knew what they were trying to do. Kazami would dodge and Izumo would attack at the same moment.

It was true that she could not think of two expectations at the same time. Parallel thoughts were not possible.

That was why her opponents were acting at the same time.

If she intercepted Kazami, Izumo’s attack would hit her a moment later.

But if she wanted to intercept Izumo, Kazami was in the way.

…In that case, I guess I should target the one in the back.

Kazami had no attack power.

While Kazami would be in the way, the only danger was Izumo behind her.

And, she thought. *This Kazami girl is what matters most to him.*

That meant he would attack as soon as he could to make sure the girl was not

harmed and he would make an attack that was even more certain to hit her than before.

As for Kazami, she was sure to wait until the last moment to make sure Jord could not avoid Izumo's attack.

…In that case…

Jord decided who to target, what to expect, and what to attack.

…Kazami!

If she attacked that girl, Izumo would crumble, so the diversion was actually the better option.

As soon as she made up her mind, Kazami took action during her approach.

She made a quick cartwheel to evade and that exposed her outstretched body to Jord.

Her wrists had already reached the ground, so she twisted them to begin her evasion.

Trying to blind me again? thought Jord as she prepared her weapon.

In that moment, Jord saw Kazami's hands stop before completing their twisting motion.

"!"

The girl pushed off the ground in a jump.

By the time, Jord wondered what was happening, it was already too late.

After making her hand-stand jump, Kazami's back slammed into Jord.

This produced an impact, but Jord could easily endure it.

However, Kazami was not trying to knock the woman over.

She wrapped her knees and legs around Jord's shoulders and neck and bent backwards.

Kazami's legs were dangling down from Jord's neck.

This was a Frankensteiner.

But she failed to throw Jord. The woman spread her legs and held her ground.

"…!!"

However, Kazami did not stop there. She swung her upside-down body like a pendulum and…

"Are you going to use the reaction to sit up and fully block my vision!?"

Jord understood. As soon as Kazami sat up and covered her face, Izumo's sword would strike her defenseless body.

Even if she created an expectation that she would dodge Izumo's attack, Kazami would continue blocking her vision, she would not see the next attack coming, and that attack would hit her.

And that was exactly what started to happen.

Kazami swung her arms as if throwing something.

"!"

And she quickly shot upwards to block Jord's vision.

She swung her arms forward, bent her abs, and then latched onto Jord's head to block her view.

At the same time, Jord could sense Izumo moving. He sank down toward the ground to remain hidden behind Kazami and then…

“Go for it, Chisato!”

●

Kazami realized Izumo had swung his sword one-handed behind her.

She had swung her arms upwards and used the momentum to grab onto Jord’s head.

Her pose was similar to someone just before performing a Frankensteiner.

Jord’s vision was blocked, so she had to choose between peeling Kazami away or avoiding Izumo’s attack.

The former would give Izumo a chance to attack and the latter would allow a second attack shortly thereafter.

…Either way she won’t escape unscathed!

A moment later, Kazami heard Jord’s expectation.

The woman spoke her coming expectation aloud.

“Can my grandson…”

She took a breath.

“…really attack this girl?”

●

Izumo realized the tip of his sword had turned toward Kazami’s back.

His body was automatically responding to Jord’s expectation.

He tried to stop it, but he still tightly held the hilt and pointed the blade at Kazami.

…Not good!

At this rate, the sword would definitely skewer Kazami. He had no doubt about that.

He saw Kazami look back at him in surprise, but a beat later, he saw her raise her eyebrows a little, close her eyes, and nod.

She was entrusting herself to him and showing that she trusted him.

…So I’ve gotta show off my good side!

He immediately decided that he could not allow himself to harm her.

So first, he let go of the sword.

The weapon slowly fell and the possibility of accidentally killing Kazami vanished.

However, he was still a prisoner of Jord’s expectation.

His right fist was proof of that. He clenched his fist and aimed it toward Kazami.

With her slender body, he would be lucky if this blow only broke a few of her ribs.

He could not allow that, but then what was he to do?

There was no way he could avoid attacking her. It was a god’s expectation.

So was there an attack that would not do any damage?

There was, so he used that.

While still forming his right fist, he raised the index finger.

“Half kancho!!”

“Kyah!”

He pulled off the attack with the perfect timing, speed, and power.

But UCAT’s armored uniform was overly sturdy for him and his current defenses could not even handle the reaction.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow! I jammed my finger!!”

Still, he had avoided harming that precious girl.

That was a clever decision, he praised himself.

“Man, that was a close one, wasn’t it?”

He looked up and saw something there.

It was Kazami’s left fist flying in from the side. In other words, it was a left backfist.

“What do you think you’re doing to a girl’s but!?”

She scored a direct hit.

The impact sent him flying more than it actually hurt, but he still got a good look at Kazami.

She was clinging to Jord’s neck with her legs and left arm and she held a weapon in her right hand.

It was a spear.

●

Jord widened her eyes in surprise.

Kazami held a spear tip in her right hand and she was trying to swing it down at Jord.

“How can you use that spear!?”

“It’s simple.”

Kazami had her left arm locked onto Jord’s neck and back and she narrowed her eyes from close enough to feel her breath.

Jord then heard what the girl said.

“I’d forgotten I had attached anchors to it to make it heavier, but that lightened it up a fair bit.”

Jord saw a single anchor attached to the spear.

Kazami had likely picked it up while wrapping her legs around Jord’s neck and leaning back.

Hiding Izumo’s attack had not been her only reason to rise up and block Jord’s vision.

“It was to keep me from seeing the spear!?”

“That’s right.”

Jord heard Izumo’s footsteps behind Kazami’s voice.

He intended to pick up his dropped sword and attack.

They would attack simultaneously, so how could she avoid that with a single expectation?

Jord then spoke her answer.

It was a simple statement that closed everything off.

“Will you be crushed?”

Kazami and Izumo immediately crashed into the ground.

●

Izumo felt an impact all across his body.

The rocky ground was hard and the damage was much more thorough then from being hit by something.

His organs jumped up inside him and the core of his body felt knocked out of place.

…*Whoa.*

Not only did he lack his divine protection, but this concept space seemed to actually give him pain.

He could not seem to get any air back into his lungs and he had trouble breathing.

Kazami was collapsed next to him with spear in hand and she seemed to have hit her head.

“Ow…”

She squeezed her eyes shut and gently squirmed.

Past her, Jord stood tall in her white combat coat.

Izumo saw her exhale, scratch her head, and smile bitterly.

“I really should have made that kind of expectation earlier.”

She looked to him.

“I should have just expected that you would lose.”

That expectation was guaranteed to come true.

They would lose.

And as proof, all strength left Izumo’s body.

His stomach relaxed and air finally entered his lungs.

“Y’know,” he said in a trembling voice. “You are my grandmother, aren’t you?”

“Are you hoping I’ll have mercy on you for that? Not a chance.”

“Why not?”

Jord shook her head.

“To me, you’re a collection of betrayed expectations.” She lowered her eyebrows a little. “My world, my daughter, and everything else refused to do what I wanted, which all led to you. And…”

“And?”

“Isn’t it pathetic?” Her bitter smile grew as he had his hands full simply breathing. “You probably don’t know what my daughter said to me when she turned her back on me.”

He did not answer. He only tried to get up.

“Stay down.”

She took a short step forward and kicked.

Her kick flew over Kazami and accurately caught him on the left side.

His left ribs groaned and he rotated three times as he flew to the right.

He rolled along the rocky ground and even the fallen grains of sand felt painful.

He landed face down and the bit of rock jutting up toward his chest was enough to make his sense of pain even more sensitive.

His ribs had been broken and he just about passed out from the pain.

But even so…

“————”

He tried to get up.

Another kick came. This one was to the right side as if to flip him over.

He flew through the air and rolled four times along the ground.

His broken ribs must have punctured a lung because he coughed up blood before he even began breathing again. He was choking on the blood.

Face up now, he heard Jord’s voice.

“There’s no point in moving. …Your defeat has already been determined.”

“Maybe…so,” he muttered. “Then make your case for victory, old lady.”

He forced a smile and his grandmother frowned.

“Are you joking?”

“No…not really,” he said. “I’m of course going to make a strong case of my own.”

As soon as he said that, something appeared: wings.

“…!?”

Black wings of reversed power grew from Jord’s back.

She quickly turned toward the black light glowing from her back.

“What…?”

“That’s Chisato’s X-Wi. Before I attacked with my sword earlier, *I ducked down and grabbed it with my left hand.* So you didn’t see that? You didn’t wonder why I only used one hand to attack?”

“————”

“And when Chisato picked up her spear, *she threw one of its anchors to me.* I attached it to X-Wi to lighten it, so I passed it to her when she hit me with her backfist.”

X-Wi weighed about three kilograms, so the anchor would just about cancel out all of its weight.

When attacking Jord with her spear, Kazami had grabbed onto the woman’s back with her left arm.

…But the spear was never meant to work. She was attaching X-Wi to your back with her left arm.

And now the black wings were linked to the movements of Jord’s back.

They made an awkward flap.

“——————”

The wings would normally have taken her forward and up, but now they took her down and back.

Jord’s body teetered backwards.

“——————!”

She lost her balance.

At the same time, Izumo stood up. He endured the intense pain remaining throughout his body and stood.

He raised the sword that was miraculously still in his right hand and he stepped toward Jord.

However, Jord shouted her expectation.

“You will lose!!”

The expectation of a god activated.

Jord also spread her legs to bear with the downward pull of the wings on her back and she raised the hammer in her right hand.

“You will lose, my grandson of betrayed expectations!!”

He briefly closed his eyes when he heard that.

Not even he understood why. Was it because she had said he was a betrayal of her expectations or was it because she had called him her grandson?

…I guess it doesn’t matter.

He was expected to lose.

That was a god’s expectation, so he was going to lose.

And so he spoke.

“Sorry, old lady. It’s true that I’m going to lose.”

He did not hesitate to swing down his sword and speak his heart.

“Hitting my own grandmother means I’ve lost as a human being.”

●

“…!?”

Jord gasped.

Izumo did not stop moving. The sword dropped straight toward her.

He had called her his grandmother.

It may have been because she had called him her grandson.

She could not be sure, but she did know that a powerful attack was about to reach her.

“Old lady, I don’t know what my mom said to you,” he said. “But I do know what she said to me. She told me to reach the point where I could live without my divine protection. And she said she would protect me until that time came.”

So…

“How am I doing now?”

Jord gave a yell in response.

She did not know if it was directed at his attack or something else, but it was

single word.

“Stop!!”

That word did indeed make Izumo stop.

However, he kept his sword held high.

“Sorry, old lady. I’ll stop losing then.”

His voice was strained from the pain he was experiencing.

“Chisato.”

He called out and the response came from below.

“Right, Kaku. This is the job for the cruel wife. I’m the one that will hit her and lose.”

Jord turned around and saw Kazami directly below.

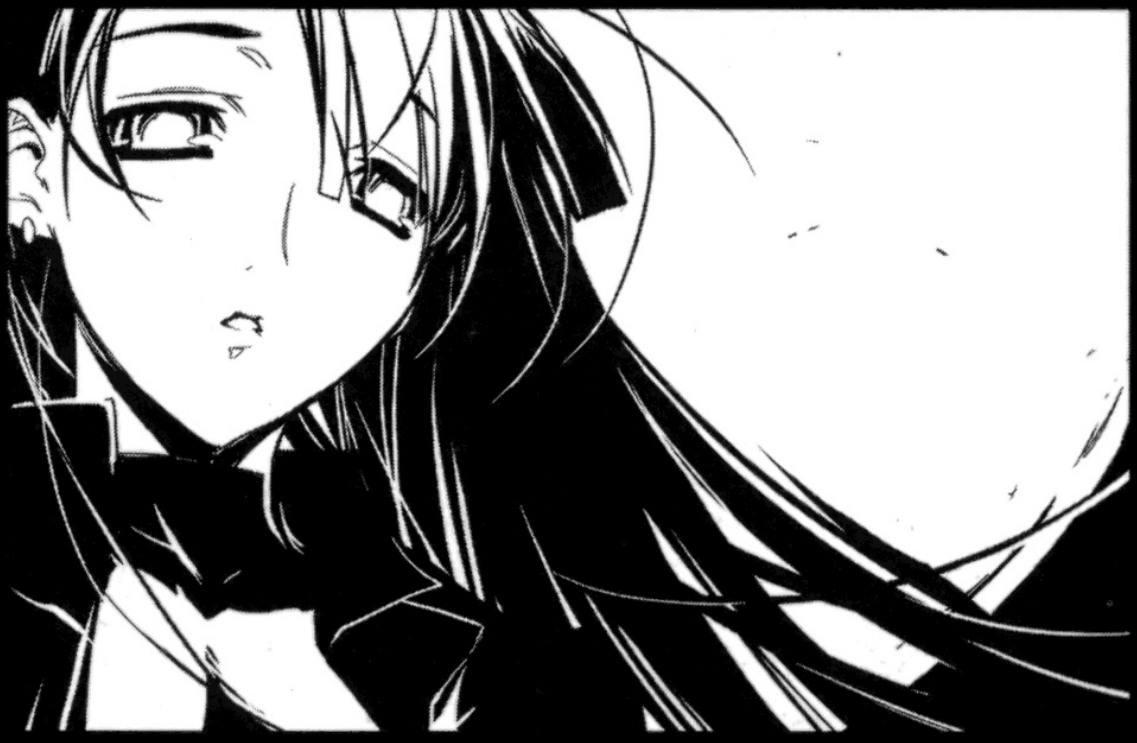
The girl’s spear was in cannon mode and its tip was aimed at Jord’s butt.

Kazami briefly brought her hands together as if praying to her and then she spoke while squeezing the trigger.

“I’ll take the defeat, so you take this cannon kancho!!”

Chapter 5

“Beginning of the Arrival”



I have no voice to interrupt
I have no thoughts to interrupt
I do not even have a delaying stalemate

●

Sayama entered a five meter square corridor which was filled with dark blue light and he saw a single figure standing before him.

She was a maid with white wings.

She shook her black hair and bowed.

“I am Noah. I am currently the only automaton aboard this ship to have reactivated and I am a terminal that allows voice input for Noah’s consciousness. Over.”

Sayama nodded at the voice ringing from the walls, but…

“Shinjou-kun?”

His questioning gaze was turned toward Noah’s face which resembled one from his memories.

However, Noah shook her head.

“Angels are made in their master’s image. Over.”

“In other words, you were made by Shinjou Yukio?”

“Do you know my creator, Sayama-sama? Over.”

“Yes,” was all Sayama said.

…So she knows who I am, too

She had likely heard from Mikoku.

Noah suddenly turned her back to him and Sayama stood a step behind her.

“You are not going to stop me?”

“I am meant to save the people. Over.”

She continued.

“But Mikoku-sama has yet to request my help. Over.”

“You are a wonderful automaton, Noah-kun.”

“I have determined there is no need to use an honorific. Over.”

Sayama spoke to her back.

“Could you say ‘over’ for me?”

“Over. Over.”

“So you really do say it twice.”

“Testament. If I am to say ‘over’, I will say it twice. Over.”

Noah began to walk.

“Sayama-sama, Noah will fully activate in another seventeen minutes. If you are in a hurry, then come this way. I will guide you to the concept creation facility. Over.”

She produced no footsteps as she walked.

As far as Sayama could see, her feet were reaching the ground, but her gravitational control seemed to be preventing them from actually contacting the surface.

Perhaps to not dirty the floor even a little, she walked without touching her true body.

He then heard a voice: Noah’s voice.

She seemed to be singing and there were no ‘overs’.

“Come, come, you stride of mud armor.

“Go, go, you pulse of metal weaponry.

“We speak on behalf of the border of blades and firearms.

“We cry out for the shore beyond life and death.

“The ark that travels between worlds meets disaster.

“The power that enters the gap between emotion and reason brings happiness.

“When the two arrive, there is conflict.

“When the two appear, there is peace.

“When the two meet, there are questions.

“When the two are finished, there are answers.”

The lyrics of Noah’s song filled her wings with light.

In response, the dark blue light from the walls strengthened.

…You would almost think that light is sterilizing everything.

Sayama followed behind Noah.

His footsteps rang loudly and he left muddy footprints in the corridor.

●

Destruction was established in an instant.

There were three great elements of destructions below the night sky. The small elements were too numerous to count.

The three great elements came from three giant metal dragons being knocked upwards and away in the sky and forest.

The smaller elements were metal vehicles and people also being knocked upwards in the sky and forest.

The sound of the wind was greater than the sounds of impact and metal.

This was because the destroyer was wrapped in wind as it moved.

It was a white god of war, a humanoid machine measuring over ten meters tall.

But a single flap of its six wings launched its great mass upwards and white homing rounds were fired from between its wings.

With the three mechanical dragons incapacitated by the gale, the mountain pass belonged to the white giant.

It stood on the forest path as if making the moonlit wind its own.

The giant looked to the base of the mountain.

There were people there.

Countless people were hiding behind mechanical dragons with their right leg cut and smashed or their torso destroyed by a shell.

From Typhon’s shoulder, Tatsumi asked a question with the moon on her back.

“What will you do?”

The backlight hid her expression, but her voice came from that shadowy form.

“Are you sure?”

It was a quiet question.

“Are you sure you want me to decide?”

As if she could not hold back any longer, she had Typhon raise its right arm.

That arm held a sword.

Its wings rose and shimmering heat appeared behind it.

The wind was slowly rising.

“Then…”

Tatsumi’s voice reached everyone below.

“I will decide.”

A moment later, the air exploded behind her.

The white giant’s full strength would collide with the people who could not escape.

But something else happened.

“Stop!!”

A voice moved between Typhon and the mechanical dragons.

A small, skinny body spread its arms and spoke at the approaching white wind.

“Don’t you understand!?”

The shout pierced the wind with no hint of timidity.

“The understanding you want isn’t here!”

But the wind did not stop.

A quick attack was sent straight forward.

●

Tatsumi looked down below while wondering if the moonlight on her back was cold.

“I see you didn’t evade.”

Looking down from Typhon’s shoulder, she saw a sword stabbed into the ground.

That was the attack she had just swung down.

A girl stood only two centimeters in front of the thick blade.

She had blonde hair, a blue armored uniform, and an orange flight jacket.

Tatsumi knew her name.

She was Heo Thunderson.

There were some tears in the corners of her eyes, her shoulders rose and fell as she breathed, and she opened her mouth.

“————”

She slowly looked up and their eyes met.

The backlight from the moon would prevent that girl from seeing Tatsumi’s eyes, but she still looked Tatsumi directly in the eye.

Her blue eyes seemed certain that she was staring right at her.

…She has a lot of confidence.

That thought led Tatsumi to ask a question.

“Why? Why don’t you run?”

She received an answer almost immediately.

“Because you’re wrong. This isn’t who you should be fighting!”

Tatsumi thought for a moment and finally sighed.

“Then,” she began. “Can you take on him? Can you take on your other self?”

Typhon pulled the sword from the ground.

The feeling of the sword tip in the dirt was not fed back to her from Typhon, but the motion still told Tatsumi how soft the ground was.

“Your mechanical dragon is inside the alternate space my Cowling Sword created. You have no power. So why are you here?”

“I do have power.”

“Where?”

Heo did not hesitate to respond.

“Everywhere!”

She brought her outstretched hands to her chest and flung the tears from the corners of her eyes.

“I will receive power from wherever my will can reach!!”

Tatsumi saw something as the girl shouted.

Behind her, a boy held his head in his left hand and prepared a rifle in his right hand.

Similarly, the people hiding behind the mechanical dragons checked back over their equipment.

What a stupid girl, thought Tatsumi.

“You are a demon that leads people to their deaths.”

“But…the demon that once tried to hurt me gave me happiness in the very end,” she said. “But what about you? What kind of happiness are you fighting for!?”

It was a simple question. She was asking why Tatsumi was fighting.

So Tatsumi thought about her answer.

…*Well…*

But she suppressed her thoughts and simply spoke.

“I am waiting. It is fun…but it is also boring.”

“…Eh?”

She had no intention of saying more.

She was the one who had taken her power and Alex would likely take care of the enemies flying above before long.

I am the one that took his rightful enemy from him, she thought.

So…

“Will taking care of you fill the time as I wait? Or will I be taking responsibility for stealing Alex’s enemy?”

Typhon raised its sword.

The men beyond the mechanical dragons began to move, but she did not care.

Her target was the girl directly below.

If that girl was lost, the others would lose the will supporting their strength.

…Sorry.

I'm the one at fault here, she thought.

She was tired of waiting and more importantly…

…This fight began when I killed his father.

The evil would play the role of the evil and the honest would play the role of the honest.

Tatsumi had the sword swung down as if further deepening herself.

But…

"————!?"

Wind crashed into her.

That wind contained the groaning and weight of heavy metal and it flew straight down from the sky.

"Ohhhh!!"

Her vision, her sight, her gaze, and her eyes saw it all.

She saw the surprised looks on the people below and she saw what had collided with Typhon.

It was a black god of war.

"Susahito Custom!!"

●

The collision was instantaneous.

Typhon moved its wings and flew so it would not be knocked back.

Without a moment's delay, it moved back one hundred meters and landed with a spray of dirt rising from its heels.

It was turned to the side and Tatsumi looked forward to the moonlit space filled with a trailing metallic ring.

It was there.

Below the sea of the stars and the island of the moon, she saw two wings darker than the night.

Its hips were lowered to protect the people and she recognized the stance.

"Oh…"

Her voice could have been a sigh or a note of surprise.

She trembled and brought a hand to her cheek.

…He's here.

Susahito Custom seemed to answer her.

"I'm here, Miki. I was slowed down helping out the other units, though."

Yes, she thought. *But it's fine if you're late.*

"You're here, aren't you?"

When she heard Susahito Custom's affirmative, she felt the core of her body shake.

For so long, her other self had fled, chosen not to fight, or tried to pacify her,

but now he was truly standing in her way.

…He's finally here.

"But…why are you here?"

Her question yearned for a single response.

And she received exactly that response.

"To win."

He took a breath.

"To win!!"

She did not know why, but those words sent tears spilling from her eyes.

She simply nodded.

"I…"

She had waited.

She had waited so long for this opponent. The battle she had waited so long for was about to be established.

It would be a head-on clash with her other self now that he was taking this seriously.

She moved as if to leap into the waiting embrace of that battle.

She launched Typhon forward.

"I…!"

She no longer had to wait, so her tears scattered in the wind and were replaced by a smile.

Susahito Custom responded with movement of its own.

The explosions of air created a racing wind and a protective power.

Meanwhile, her power was one of attack.

Her speed was greater, but he was also using his full speed.

Even on the very first step, he did not hold back.

Due to their relative speeds, the black form seemed to shimmer for a moment.

Immediately afterwards, the white wind and black wind clashed head-on with their blades.

●

Heo and the others could not move from their position on the mountain.

Being stopped by Tatsumi had allowed the dolls to arrive in great numbers.

They were stuck fortifying their defenses behind the destroyed mechanical dragons and the dolls were making sporadic attacks to hold them back and wear them out.

However, there was another reason they could not move.

Intense sounds rang out from nearby in the forest.

Black and white winds clashed with metal and sparks.

Heo could not take her eyes off of it.

…Tatsumi.

That was Tatsumi.

Tatsumi had sealed Thunder Fellow away from Heo.

Heo was about ready to accept that Thunder Fellow was not coming back.

But…

…Is there really no way of getting Thunder Fellow back?

If so, wouldn't the hint lie in Tatsumi?

She could not be certain and she did not know what to do, but she felt like she would find the answer in Tatsumi's Cowling Sword.

Close by, she heard sounds of gunfire and the sounds of the battle to destroy the dolls rushing through the forest.

Farther away, she heard sounds of sword fighting and the sounds of the battle that whipped up the wind and sent two different kinds of light and power against each other.

She could still hear explosions in the sky.

The mechanical dragon named Alex was using his acceleration and attack power to shoot down American UCAT's mechanical dragons.

She could hear the transmissions coming from American UCAT.

One of the transmissions left an impression on her.

Just before being shot down, one of the mechanical dragon pilots had commented on Alex.

…He's insane.

He had acceleration, maneuverability, attack power, evasion, and the decisiveness to control it all.

All this time, Heo had heard something that seemed to tear at the sky.

That was the sound of Alex's movements.

Without rest, he forced himself through movements that threatened to break his frame.

He was not soaring through the sky.

He was moving himself as if ripping apart or breaking the sky.

He could only manage this because he had combined with the dragon and did not need a human pilot, so the other mechanical dragons could not do the same.

But that may have been why a nearby mohawked man said what he did.

"How can he take on all of American UCAT's dragons on his own?"

Heo knew.

He was constantly pushing himself to his own limit.

Even if his abilities were greater than American UCAT's dragons, that was a comparison between individual machines.

A certain word was needed to overturn the advantage a group had over an individual.

And the mohawked man tilted his head and spoke that word.

"This is insane… For us rank and file anyway."

He looked back to his comrades gathering ammunition that had fallen to the ground.

"American UCAT's dragons always take off in units of twelve, so to fight them…wouldn't you need twelve times the madness?"

“This enemy must have that.”

A man in a hockey mask stood up and slapped the mohawked man’s shoulder with gunfire in the background.

“It doesn’t really matter, so help us gather the ammo.”

“But I normally do deskwork, so I’m nearsighted.”

The mohawked man reluctantly joined the others and they split between those fighting and those working.

One group fought to protect that location and the other group maintained weapons, treated injuries, and prepared to join the fighters again.

Sound reached them from the sky.

Sound also reached them from the forest.

And Heo realized a certain fact beyond all that sound.

No one here could fall back.

Neither American UCAT’s mechanical dragons nor Alex could afford to admit defeat.

…They both have something to protect.

Only one side could be protected, Alex’s frame continued to groan, and the other dragons fell from the sky.

…I have to do something.

As soon as she thought that, she heard Harakawa’s voice from the side.

“You look like you want to do something, Heo Thunderson.”

“W-well… Don’t you want to stop this!?”

She looked over and saw Harakawa repairing the functioning motorcycles with some skinheads.

She spoke toward his back while listening to the slicing of the atmosphere that flew through the sky and to the wooden arrows striking the broken mechanical dragons.

“He’s waiting.”

“Your delusions are?”

“No!” she shouted. “My other self…is waiting.”

“Your symptoms are only getting worse,” muttered Harakawa. “For one, can you even reach the person waiting for you?”

She could not answer his question, but some words came to her rescue.

They came from the American UCAT members and some men with reverse mohawks.

“Don’t worry.”

They were trying to restart one of the dragons.

The dragon trembled when they tried to start it up, but they soothed it when it failed to move.

“Even if you or we can’t do it, someone will take you there.”

After all…

“If you wish to go and continue to try to get there, it’s bound to happen.”

“That’s right,” someone replied.

It was the people from Shizuoka and Yamanashi UCAT who had returned from the forest carrying the injured.

Their breath appeared white in the cold air and none of them was unharmed.

“That’s how we fight. We enjoy using our strength on the things we want to bet on. So if…if by some chance…”

The commander rewrapped the scarf he used as a hood and looked back into the forest.

He was preparing to head out to attack without taking a break and those resting stood up to join him.

“If you manage to fly again, then we can say that we helped you get there.”

“Th-then…!” asked Heo. “What if I don’t manage to fly again!?”

“That’s simple.” The eyes inside the scarf turned toward her with a smile. “Then we managed to protect the girl with an unbreakable spirit who we took to the battlefield. …That’s normal. That’s enough right there. You flying again would just be something extra. After the battle is over, we’d be able to brag about that to the others over our drinks. That’s how it works.”

With that, he turned back around and Heo heard a voice.

“Don’t worry.”

It was a female voice she recognized.

She turned toward the mountain stream where the mountain path reached them.

She saw two people standing there.

One was a man with short blond hair riding a large touring motorcycle.

The other was a tall girl.

Heo felt like she recognized the girl from somewhere.

…Or maybe not?

The girl walked toward her. She walked slowly and surely.

Her shadow wavered as she moved.

Her long, glossy black hair waved and fluttered in the night air.

Heo and everyone else then heard her speak as the moonlight revealed her smiling face.

“Don’t worry.”

She took a breath.

“You will be able to fly again.”

Heo gave a shout at that tone of voice and the owner of the black hair.

“You’re…!”

●

The black and white winds repeatedly collided.

The constant fury produced sparks and crashing metal, but the wind would sweep away that light and noise the very next moment.

There was wind and noise.

There was movement and shouts.

At the leading edge of the collisions and reflections, the colors white and black rampaged through the forest.

The leading edge of the white was ruled by a giant six-winged god of war.

It used twin swords, the homing rounds from its wings, and the rushing strength of its own body.

Meanwhile, the leading edge of the black was ruled by a two-winged god of war.

It used the sword in its right hand, its left fist, and kicks from either foot.

Sword struck sword, fist was stopped by armor, and rushing was met with evasion.

They were truly in constant motion with no rest.

The black god of war, Susahito Custom, attacked.

Hiba used an offensive method that chained together attack, evasion, and movement.

He did not have Mikage to manage defense and fine-tuned control, but he continued to fight.

…If I can fight here…

She was waiting for him.

Just like Tatsumi, Mikage had to be waiting for him.

He trusted in that as he wielded his blade.

He felled countless trees, jumped, flipped around in midair, launched his sword, and took a step as soon as he landed.

He stepped forward.

Always forward.

His will to advance was born from his lack of fear.

“Ohhh!”

He still could not reach the one waiting for him in the moonlight.

The blade in his hand did not even touch her body.

But she was waiting. She was waiting and waiting with a smile.

“Miki!”

He let loose his words, thinking that his thoughts at least would reach her.

The speech center of his brain had overheated from the intensity of the battle.

“What do you mean you killed my perverted dad!?”

“…Perverted?”

“Sorry! I really have to focus right now, so please ignore that!”

“Then…the answer to your question is simple.”

She hung her head a little.

A shadow fell over her face, hiding her expression.

Still, he could hear her voice through the howling wind.

The words came slow and faltering.

“That man rushed to where we were. We were gathered in front of the gate below Noah that couldn’t be opened and had been abandoned. And I assumed he was our enemy.” She gave a bitter laugh. “But when he saw me, he thought I

was just a child. So…”

“So…?”

“He let down his guard. …For a moment he didn’t realize what had happened when my blade stabbed through him and out his back.”

She laughed quietly.

“He apparently died afterwards. He completed his job as one of the Five Great Peaks and ran out of strength. But…if it hadn’t been for my attack, don’t you think he might have been able to make it back alive?”

Hiba did not answer her question.

“Do you understand?”

He still could not answer.

And…

“You are allowed to ask me to give back your father.”

Even then, he still could not answer.

…That…

So he gave a shout that rejected her question entirely.

“That isn’t your responsibility!!”

“But I stabbed him. I can still feel it in my hands.”

She prevented him from saying more.

“He wouldn’t have had any other serious injuries. After all…”

He could hear a sigh in her voice.

“He was your father. He was my father’s counterpart.”

“!?”

Typhon flapped its wings and moved back.

Hiba tried to pursue, but he could only manage to move forward as he deflected the barrage of homing rounds.

His sword roared as the stream of bullets struck it and he heard his opponent’s voice again.

“It was on his right side just a bit below the ribs. It must have cut through his kidney and intestines. Yes, when I came to this world ten years ago, I checked in the medical books again and again. And it all proved that what I did and what I can feel in my hands was real.”

“…!”

Hiba moved forward in protest.

An explosion of light tore at his armor and a few parts were blasted away.

The noise had essentially become an audible blow.

But he still moved forward.

His attacks were directed toward the coming bullets and his evasion was transformed into racing movement.

…Dammit.

As he ran, his thoughts about his big sister figure weighed on his heart.

There was something in his heart that he did not entirely understand.

He could not tell if it was a good or a bad thing.

He could not express just what it was in words.

He could only give a smile of resignation and say it was because he was stupid.

But just this once, he did not give into resignation.

Was it his father who had told him it was okay to be stupid as long as he grew up big and strong?

He decided the stupid had to play the role of the stupid.

"————!"

He stepped forward.

He was now less than thirty meters away.

That distance could be covered in an instant for ten meter gods of war.

And at that distance, he became aware of the weight in his heart.

Would he be able to convey that weight to her?

…Oh, damn.

He leaned forward and pushed himself forward faster than he could fall.

…It would be a shame if this didn't reach her.

He ran.

He carried himself forward by taking his rising knee and stabbing the foot down toward the ground.

The wings on his back used explosions of air to blast him forward.

He raised the sword on the right, twisted his entire body for the slash, and moved onward.

At the same time, Typhon took action.

Typhon no longer fled and now readied both swords.

"From below!?"

The twin blades were lowered on either side in the shape of Mount Fuji.

In contrast, all of its wings were expanded above.

With a slight time delay between them, thirty-two shots flew from the spread wings and into the heavens above.

Hiba knew what she was trying to do.

The barrage of bullets would come from above and the two swords would come from below.

Nevertheless, he did not hesitate.

…I will win.

The bullets of light illuminated his big sister figure from the sky, but her expression was hidden by shadow.

He could not see her face, so…

…I will win!!

He sent out his single sword.

●

Tatsumi saw Susahito Custom make a full swing of its sword, but not at her.

…At the forest!?

Trees were chopped down in the double digits.

They flew.

More than being “felled” trees, they became “flying” trees as the force of the sword launched them into the air.

They covered her vision in front of Typhon and they covered the sky.

Overhead, something hit a few of the flying trees.

It was the falling light of Typhon’s attacks.

The homing beams of light collided with the barricade of trees.

“…!”

In front of the bursting light and breaking trees, Tatsumi looked to Susahito Custom.

That black form was approaching from below.

The airborne trees shielded him from the overhead attacks while he slipped below those trees.

But it did not matter as long as she could see it.

“There!!”

Typhon’s arms shot up and thrust the swords forward with a snap of the elbow.

The sword tips sliced through the trees and pierced the black armor of the approaching shadow.

The swords penetrated the shadow.

A high-pitched sound rang as they gouged into the metal armor.

But…

“!?”

Typhon pulled back its swords.

That movement also pulled some black armor back through the falling pieces of the trees and exploding light.

It was the main chest armor.

However, the swords had only pierced that metal panel.

The actual god of war was not there.

Tatsumi frowned for a moment.

“It can’t be…”

A moment later, some wind blew in.

It came from overhead, through the time-delayed barrage that poured down like rain.

It was a black wind.

It was Susahito Custom after purging most of its armor to lighten itself.

The black god of war had used the removed armor as a decoy while jumping into the downpour of exploding light.

In the midst of the attacks had been the perfect place to hide.

“…!”

Typhon could not immediately send its swords back out and the black god of war prepared its sword and spread its wings overhead.

This was a power dive.

The thrust of the two wings did the talking as this helmet breaker dropped straight down.

Even as the exploding light smashed its body, its desperate attack grew in the center of her vision.

He was targeting her.

He was going to reach her.

But…

“No.”

She smiled.

She lowered her head to cover her face in shadow and she smiled.

“That still isn’t enough to reach me!!”

●

As he listened to the metallic roar of his full thrust, Hiba saw a certain sword technique.

From Typhon’s shoulder, his opponent drew the sword on her back.

She readied the drawn blade in her right hand and blocked another blade.

She blocked Susahito Custom’s full power slash.

…Impossible…

Susahito Custom’s entire body was floating in midair.

Still in its striking pose, it was perfectly balanced atop his big sister figure’s sword.

The trees fell behind him and Typhon’s barrage struck the earth and trees.

The light shined up from below and wind burst upwards.

But…

…This is bad.

Even in his mechanical body, Hiba felt a chill.

He also heard a quiet sigh.

“Why?”

Tatsumi inhaled ever so slightly with her head still lowered.

“Why can’t it get through to him?”

Eh? he thought.

Her question was directed at herself rather than at him.

…What does Miki want to get through to me?

That would be why she had waited and why she was fighting.

It can’t be, he thought. *Could it be?* he wondered.

“…!”

As soon as it came to him, she moved.

She almost seemed to be slapping him for being so slow.

It was a quick slash of the sword supporting him.

Just as Hiba made a split-second decision, Susahito Custom received the attack.

Everything he had sent Tatsumi's way was returned via her Cowling Sword.

It felt like a cry of rejection saying his power had been insufficient.

And as a result…

"————!"

Susahito Custom was broken and blown away.

●

Tatsumi watched as Susahito Custom was sliced in two.

The destruction was caused more by the great impact than by the actual cut of the slash.

Susahito Custom flew overhead in a parabolic arc and it was split in two at the waist.

The sound of tearing metal sounded like fingernails on glass.

The bisected metal body was caught by the trees, but…

"————————"

The forest could not contain the great weight and collapsed.

Trees bent, but instead of breaking, their roots just seemed to give up. Unable to support the burden, roots swelled up from the ground and trees toppled, one after another.

The view opened up beyond the collapsing trees.

There was a path there.

It was the path Japanese UCAT's train had created on its way in.

Tatsumi saw the destroyed mechanical dragons and the people with poor combat ability.

All of them were pinned in place by the dolls.

Inertia took Susahito Custom's wreckage to that path as if to show its destruction to the people there.

The metal body scraped along the fallen trees, rolled, and arrived at the path's entrance with its upper body and lower body separate.

The wreckage tore at the ground as it slowly came to a stop.

Tatsumi then looked to the people on the path.

The girl who was Alex's opposite was there.

Seeing her, Tatsumi looked around, but…

…Mikage isn't there.

The Thunderson girl had the only blonde hair and Tatsumi did not recognize anyone else.

That's for the best, she thought.

"I didn't have to show her Ryuuji's death," she muttered while sheathing her sword on her back.

Suddenly, she noticed Heo Thunderson turn toward her.

No, if the girl had simply been looking at her, she would not have cared.

Something else bothered her.

…She's surprised?

There was an amazed or dumbfounded look on the girl's face.

"What is it?"

When she asked with gunfire in the background, Heo looked taken aback and frantically spoke up.

"D-do you need something!?"

Her surprised voice produced motion around her.

The men there – the ones with mohawks, the skinheads, and the macho men – frantically surrounded her and crossed their arms.

"We are the Great Heo's elite guards! What do you need with the Great Heo!?"

Tatsumi frowned.

"Elite guards?"

"I-I don't know what they're talking about!" insisted Heo. "They're adlibbing. C-c'mon, you say something too, Harakawa!"

The boy sitting next to her working on maintenance gave a casual comment.

"The Great Heo says she's angry."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The men bowed very, very deeply before Heo.

In the center, Heo took a step back, blushed, and nervously looked over at Tatsumi.

"U-um, wh-what am I supposed to do?"

"Don't ask me."

As soon as Tatsumi tilted her head, the boy next to Heo raised his hand.

"————?"

He had thrown something silver: a wrench.

Tatsumi looked up, but less to follow the motion and more in confusion as to why he would throw the tool.

In that instant, the bowing men turned around and shouted in unison with Heo.

"Now!!"

They were shouting toward Tatsumi, but what did "now" mean?

Needless to say, they were not speaking to her.

…Then…

She found the answer almost immediately.

To her left, someone was running along the short distance of Typhon's shoulder.

It was Hiba Ryuuji.

"…!? You're alive!?"

There was no point in asking.

Blood flowed from different parts of his body, but he was in the process of swinging back his right arm.

He was charging forward.

Meanwhile, Tatsumi's sword was sheathed on her back.

…Oh, no!

It all went back to Susahito Custom earlier.

She had assumed the battle was over when she caught the god of war's fall and sliced it in two.

…But what if he had left Susahito Custom just before then?

The answer was approaching before her eyes. By releasing his combination with the god of war as it was destroyed, he had taken part of the damage but still lived.

He only wore the pants of his armored uniform and he had likely jumped from Susahito Custom to Typhon's shoulder as the former god of war was blown away.

Also…

"You got this close because Heo and the others distracted me!"

His gaze came straight for her.

She instead chose to evade and she did so by moving back and away from him.

But he was faster.

He moved right up to her in an instant, crouched down, and clenched his right fist.

"————!"

His fist flew in an uppercut.

In that moment, Tatsumi made one new movement.

She moved her right hand and Typhon followed her instructions.

She had Typhon pull back its left shoulder, the shoulder Hiba was running along.

The god of war moved and the joint at its left collar bone opened up.

That briefly added some distance between the two of them, but…

"!"

Hiba had already taken a strong step forward and thrown his fist.

His fist tore in at her, so she leaned back and away.

"…!!"

●

In the next moment, everyone saw Hiba's right fist stop after touching the bottom of Tatsumi's breast.

●

Hiba stopped moving.

He was entirely focused on the end of his right fist.

He had meant for that fist to hit Tatsumi's side and a solid hit might have even broken a few of her ribs.

His mistake had been to quickly stop once he realized he had missed.

The sensation rested atop his fist.

"Is this…?"

When he opened his hand, grabbed it, and lifted it, he could tell.

"Is this an 88 B? And you're not wearing a bra."

Just the right size, he thought before realizing something.

…It can't be.

He looked up in surprise at Tatsumi's face.

He saw a dry look there, but he smiled.

"You dodged everything I threw at you in the past, but today, I finally got in a grope!!"

Yay!

"Yes! Under my rules, this is a win!!"

A moment later, he saw her move.

She twisted her body like the windup for a left-handed tornado pitch. When she turned back around, her face was beet red.

"You pervert!!"

She threw a slap with all her strength and Hiba was sent spinning through empty air.

●

Tatsumi dealt with it all almost entirely on reflex.

She had only made one conscious decision.

…I must hit my enemy with the greatest attack I can!

Her right hand had already instructed Typhon to pull back its left shoulder, so she could hit her falling enemy with the same attack he had used on her: an uppercut.

The left shoulder moved forward and the metal fist swung upwards with extreme speed and weight.

"Punch him, Typhon!!"

The fist instantly broke the sound barrier and was surrounded by the sound of the splitting air and an explosion of water vapor.

The metal strike collided with her target and the fist completed its follow through.

This was an exaggerated reproduction of the night before last.

The god of war had punched him on that night too, but it had not been a solid blow and it had not been at this speed.

This time, it was perfect.

Tatsumi figured this would satisfy him, but then she saw something.

"…Eh?"

Hiba had shrunk down in the instant the attack hit him.

…Is that…?

She knew exactly what it was.

It was her own technique.

That movement allowed one to absorb and neutralize any strike.

"Can you really do that!?"

Impossible, she thought. *No one but me can pull off that technique.*

But she heard another voice from directly ahead.

“He can!”

It was a female voice and one she recognized.

“Ryuuji-kun can do it! He did it when Yonkichi’s attack shell punched him! And when he did…”

It was Mikage’s voice. It was a dignified voice that should not have been there.

“He came to me!!”

A moment later, Hiba did exactly that.

He received Typhon’s fist on the soles of his feet, shrank down, and…

“!!”

He leaped.

He leaped backwards toward the barricade of destroyed mechanical dragons.

His powerful jump was undoubtedly taking him to one point among the enemy.

A tall form stood there.

Tatsumi looked at that form and found an unfamiliar appearance.

But…

“Is that your final evolution!?”

●

Hiba looked forward as he landed.

He looked to the person standing at the front of the group in the moonlit forest.

It was Mikage.

But it was not the Mikage he knew.

“…”

He was dumbfounded, so she gave him a troubled smile and averted her gaze.

“I ended up coming. I couldn’t bear to wait any longer.”

And…

“What do you think?”

She swept her hair backwards with a hand.

That hair was black.

He stared blankly at that pitch black color, but he still listened to her voice.

“The philosopher’s stone left enough power in me for one final evolution. It gave me the color I wanted.”

“The color of shadow…” [1]

“Nn.”

Mikage shrugged and looked back at him.

When he looked her in the eye, he noticed a single tuft of blonde in her bangs.

She blushed and grabbed the blonde hair.

“I think my mom must have left this for me.”

She placed her hands on top of her breasts as if trying to shrink down.

“…Is it weird?”

“No…”

“Do you not like it?”

She looked afraid and Hiba saw the crowd behind her preparing guns and blades, so he frantically shook his head.

“I absolutely love it!”

“Really? Which way did you like better?”

Now that’s an insanely hard question to answer! thought Hiba as sweat thicker than blood poured down his body.

But he gave a frank answer.

“A busty blonde is wonderful as a symbol of world harmony! But black hair and an ample bust is a truly delightful symbol of Japanese elegance! To me, the latest Mikage-san is always the greatest!!”

“Really?”

Mikage breathed a sigh of relief.

“I see.”

She blushed and smiled before taking his hands.

“They’re bigger than Miki’s and I’m in my armored uniform, so I’m not wearing a bra either.”

His hands pressed up on the soft curve on the bottom of the bulges of her armored uniform’s chest.

She then shook her black bangs and asked a slightly concerned question.

“Do you not like them? Were Miki’s better?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

He ignored the others cocking their guns.

“Yours are the best!”

“I see.”

Her eyes bent as she showed her teeth in a smile and then she looked to the side.

A white god of war stood in the forest beyond the toppled trees.

Mikage wrapped her arms around his neck, clasped her arms together behind him, and nodded into his cheek.

“Let’s win.”

“Yes.”

He saw Tatsumi nod as if responding to them.

She breathed out to release the tension from her shoulders.

“Okay, then.”

As soon as she swung down her right arm, Typhon rushed in.

“!”

It used its full strength.

It shot straight forward with enough acceleration to blow away the trees growing behind it.

But Hiba was unfazed.

He signaled with a hand for the people behind him to stand back and he felt the strength of Mikage's arms wrapped around his neck.

She was with him.

He had waited so long for her to wake and now she was with him.

She had wished to resemble her name and she had fulfilled that wish.

And her breasts were big.

He had no complaints.

But he did open his mouth.

There was something he had to say here unrelated to breasts.

It was what linked the two of them.

It was the name of the power that could oppose the white wind approaching to clash with them.

It was…

"Susamikado!!"

●

Mikage spread her arms and a metallic sound rang out behind her.

A torso frame made of heavy black metal appeared there.

Motors, artificial muscles, arm frames, and leg frames were ejected from the space around that frame.

They all fit into place.

After the head, limbs, chest, back, additional frames, and artificial muscles all appeared, the armor appeared, wrapped around it all, and adjusted it all into shape.

The only sounds were of metal and wind.

Susamikado's autonomous system opened and closed its hands, pressed its feet against the ground, and defined its own existence from the extremities.

As everything connected together, it enveloped Mikage and Hiba.

As soon as they were taken inside, they were combined with it.

The sensation of becoming the machine and coming closer to her felt like a comfortable tickling to Hiba.

And there was a further change.

Hiba saw the change in his high-speed pressurized vision.

That change came from evolution.

In the span of an instant, additional armor and additional artificial muscles fit into place and he sensed something around the arms and head.

…Is something coming!?

It came to the right arm first.

It was a shield.

No, it was more accurately described as a long installation platform that could also be called an ejection platform.

It looked like an extremely long piece of steel armor.

“Is that the installation platform for Keravnos!?”

Armor was also ejected for the left arm.

It was a piece of metal shaped like slender, extended claws.

They mounted on the elbow and acted as a solid shield.

There was a hilt at the bottom of the shield and that hilt hinted at the presence of a black sword.

Armor attached to the chest and other areas to create a feminine silhouette.

“————————”

Finally, something like black flames burst from the back of the head.

Those flames that fluttered and danced in the wind were hair.

At the same time, Susamikado ejected wind from its entire body.

This was a god of war.

This warrior god was a machine yet it resembled a living being.

Its large shoulder armor looked like a cloak and its spread waist armor looked like a skirt.

It drew a long black sword from the shield on its left arm.

With the transformation into a shadow-colored warrior princess complete, Susamikado spread its arms a bit and spoke as if inhaling.

“————!!”

The white wind had already arrived right in front of it.

That enemy wind had the power of a gale and could neutralize any attack, but Susamikado showed no fear.

Its black hair flowed back and it stepped forward.

“Here we go!!”

It gave a shout.

“Here we go!!”

And it began the clash.

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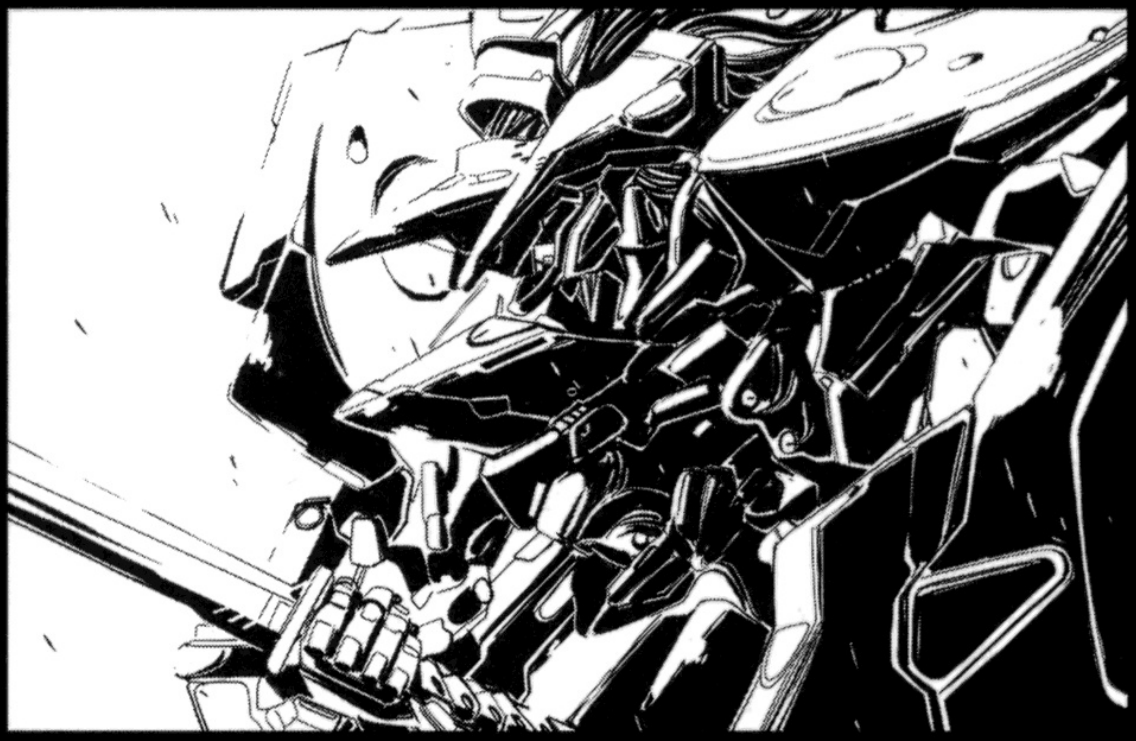
[1] Mikage means “Beautiful Shadow”.

Chapter 6

“Wind-Told Distance”



Let’s go.

●

There was sound.
The sound of iron.
The sound of steel.
The sound of metal.
It was all the sound of machines.
There was more continuing sound.
The sound of wind.
The sound of earth.
The sound of trees.
It was all the sound of movement.
There was yet more continuing sound.
The sound of impacts.
The sound of strikes.
The sound of swords.
It was all the sound of combat.
The created sounds met to make even more sound.
The sound of damage.
The sound of breaking.
The sound of destruction.
It was all the sound that summoned victory.
There were also voices.
“Oh,” the voices yelled.
“Ah,” the voices cried.
“Nn,” the voices replied.

The voices came not just from the usual directions, but also from the heavens above and skimming just off the earth below.

Swords flew.
Bullets poured.
Armor deflected.
Metal rang.
Steel struck.
Machines raced.
All movement became evasion, became attack, and never stopped.
The questioning sounds seemed to respond, call, and answer.

All movement instantly broke the sound barrier and a wrist reversing a sword was enough to slice through an explosion of water vapor.

The black and white were surrounded by the roar of vacuum and the flavor of the whipping night wind.

The black used evasion and defense to deflect and pass through the rapid series of attacks and the white blocked and dodged the black’s attacks before striking.

Sparks flew and the wind was cut apart.

The earth split and the sky shattered.

There was sound.

It was the sound of battle bearing the name “god of war”.

“I can hear it!”

The black god of war cried out to break through that sound.

It rushed toward the white god of war.

“I can hear the voice calling for me!!”

●

Mikage quit controlling the emotions filling her body.

It’s okay, she thought.

Her high-speed pressurized thoughts surrendered her body to Hiba and allowed him to use all of her strength.

They did not stop.

She kept moving her wings, moving her legs, and balancing her upper body.

She let Hiba try to do what he wanted with her body and she tried to grant it all.

It was all possible.

It was now possible for her to move as he wanted at the speeds he wanted.

She moved to block Typhon’s two swords.

She controlled the defense by using her understanding of each and every piece of armor to sense precisely how to move them all to redirect the attacks.

Like a bird controlling each individual feather to fly, Susamikado flapped onward through the damaging wind.

She raised her speed.

Faster, faster, she thought.

She did not need a character string of emotions.

She did not even need a description of her thoughts.

She reacted even faster than her reflexes.

The wind was solid, so she raised her speed.

She fought even more quickly, tried to get behind their opponent, could not, and repeatedly exchanged attacks from the side.

The attacks came from the left.

The armor on the left was being heated by the friction of the sword strikes.

The shield. She could reduce the heating with better usage of the shield.

…No!

I can’t think like that, thought Mikage.

I can’t answer if I think like that.

She could hear the sounds.

All of the sounds among the movement and collisions were conveying a certain thought.

It was…

…Miki.

Mikage wondered why the sounds that girl made sounded so much like crying.

It was a crying voice.

All of the strikes sounded like the fists of a child clinging to someone in tears.

Why?

Why was she crying when she was so strong and had so much power?

Mikage did not understand.

But she wanted to understand.

No, she *did* understand.

…Miki.

Miki had said she had killed his father.

Mikage did not know how much of that was true.

That was someone she should not have killed. As her other self's parent, he was essentially her own parent.

So she had waited for Hiba. She had waited for the heir of the man she felt she had killed.

Why had she waited?

Why had she continued to win all this time?

Why had she wished to battle Hiba so many times?

Why was she crying?

Why?

…Why did you continue to wait even when Ryuuji-kun lost?

Mikage understood.

…You defeated someone you shouldn't have defeated, so for their sake, you couldn't let yourself lose?

So even as she grew tired of always winning, she had not been able to lose.

But there was one person she could let herself lose to: the original person's heir.

…You waited for him all this time, didn't you?

For so long, she had made herself their enemy, defeated them several times, and yet waited.

She had waited for the moment when they could both use their greatest power.

Mikage had a thought as she synchronized the wings and legs for even greater speed.

…Ryuuji-kun, you're here to answer that call, aren't you?

She spoke to make way for that answer.

"Ryuuji-kun! Let's speed up!"

"Right!!"

She moved.

Her entire body moved about.

Hiba had to have noticed Miki's true thoughts and that was why he raised his own voice.

“Mikage-san!” he said as if making a promise. “I will win this!”

“Nn.”

“Go ahead, *she was telling him.* Do what you wish. I’ll lend you my strength. All of it. I’ll do anything for you.

Her strength.

She recalled an older time when she had wondered if she was just a machine and when she had feared the strength she held.

But what about now?

That strength was necessary.

Yes, she thought. *I’m glad I have this strength.*

Without it, a certain hand would have been unable to reach the person waiting for it.

So she desired even more speed.

She fully opened her wings and moved them along with her legs.

That way, each step had the same force as flying through the sky.

She picked up speed.

It did not matter how powerful the enemy was.

It did not matter how solid the enemy was.

It did not matter how strong the enemy was.

Speed would reach them.

Speed alone would never lie.

After all…

…That is how you reach someone waiting for you!

Her vision had sped up to the point that all sound vanished and she saw what was in the sky and on the earth.

The moon.

The stars.

The night.

The forest and the people.

The heated metal fragments scattering like flower petals.

And the ones dancing amid it all were a white being and herself.

They faced each other in the center of all the motion and the vacuum.

It was the perfect place.

The air had been blown outwards and only clearness remained.

It’s beautiful, thought Mikage as she saw Hiba reach his hand out toward the girl.

Their body slipped past the white swords and moved unhesitatingly forward.

As the white attempted to escape, they spun on their heel and pursued her just by facing her way.

“————”

The world looked so calm at this extreme speed.

There was no excess and only motion existed.

There was no hint of difficulty or fear of moving forward. This was where her

final evolution had taken them.

…How nice.

She danced.

Her metal heart danced along with her body.

There were white sword strikes, cannon blasts, evasive actions, defenses, and so much else.

But he slipped past it all, did not so much as graze them, and simply tried to reach his opponent with his own hand.

“Ryuuji-kun.”

His movements looked slow and she thought she saw a touch of fear in them, so she supported him from behind.

She placed her hands on his shoulders and leaned in.

“Nn.”

And she gave a push.

She gently urged him toward his other self.

She told him to go.

●

Tatsumi saw Susamikado slip below her attacks.

It happened amid the mixing vacuum and wind and amid the silence as the bottom of its defensive coat was torn.

Susamikado swung its body in the clear emptiness containing only moonlight.

It did not walk.

Nor did it run.

It did not even slide.

It only gently approached like a pendulum.

That movement told Tatsumi that Susamikado was receiving and redirecting the full burden of each and every movement.

Even the force pushing up on the soles of its feet and the pressure on its body as it moved forward.

…Are they controlling all of that!?

When a force reached someone from one direction, it left in the opposite direction.

The standard way of controlling the forces received was to pull back, but controlling all of the forces reaching their entire body was something entirely different.

Even if they pulled back from the force arriving in one direction, they would be receiving another force from the direction in which they pulled back.

If they could not pull back, then the forces would explode inside their body.

…So controlling all of the forces reaching your body is impossible.

But the word “possible” was displayed in front of her.

She saw it in Susamikado.

That was actually Hiba and Mikage.

Hiba had the same technique of controlling forces as Tatsumi did and Mikage would be controlling their entire body based on that.

She was using her high-speed calculations and her combination with the system known as a god of war.

She was simultaneously handling all of the forces arriving from a multitude of directions by adding in slight time lags and expanding the armor panels to allow the vectors to escape.

A single, instantaneous mistake would cause all of the forces to explode inside their body, but Mikage could pull it off thanks to her understanding of Hiba's actions.

They were not just one in spirit; they truly were a single individual.

They were a single bearer of strength.

…No, they are a single rider of strength.

Black wings opened before Tatsumi's eyes.

Susamikado had gently moved right up to her.

A sword approached, so she had Typhon catch it on its left sword.

She planned to attack with the right sword in the opening that created.

But…

"!?"

The left sword was deflected.

Tatsumi's technique of catching and stopping any power was rejected and deflected.

…Is this…!?

She knew what it was.

It came from strength.

It also came from skill.

The idea was simple. As soon as Tatsumi activated her negation technique, Susamikado had slightly shifted the direction of its attack.

That was much easier said than done.

After all, she determined the direction to pull back in the very instant Hiba's attack hit.

It had to happen in that instant.

Tatsumi made sure it was quick because she would be hit by the attack if she took too long.

So to knock back her technique, one had to intervene in that instant and reset the direction of their attack.

That's impossible, she thought.

But Hiba, who knew her technique, made it possible and Mikage, who had the strength, gave him the permission he needed.

And as a result, the word "negation" vanished from between Tatsumi and Hiba.

Instead, there was swordplay at extreme speed.

It was a pure exchange of swords with no excess strength.

The white silver arc raced and the black moonlit arc flew.
In that clear space, blue sparks flew and disappeared.
Blazing-hot seams blossomed and withered away in that transparent world.
They attacked.
Their attacks were their movements.
Tatsumi repeatedly struck as if brushing aside an outstretched hand.
Stay away.
…Stay away!
No.
Her thoughts went further than that.
…I'm telling you to stay away.
And yet…
…Are you still coming!?
Susamikado answered.
It seemed to slowly bend in that empty space.
It swayed like a branch in the wind.
"…"
There was no shouting voice or anything else there.
Susamikado used only its movements to move in and continue forward.
It was close enough that its breaths would have reached had it breathed.
Tatsumi then launched a supremely swift strike.
Typhon swung its right sword straight down.
Susamikado's left arm responded by rising like shimmering heat.
Its shield was there.
The sword dug into the tip of the shield.
The white blade tore away the thick steel armor.
Typhon's sword was redirected downward and Susamikado lost its shield.
Tatsumi took action at the same time.
The left sword raced toward the back of Susamikado's neck.
The flying silver arc was deflected by a black sword.
White struck black in that clear world.
The clash of the swords sounded only in her imagination.
But her goal lay beyond that.
She used her left sword to knock Susamikado's black sword further outward.
Susamikado had broken through her technique, but she returned the favor in double.
With the shield gone from the left arm, Mikage would have to rebalance due to the change in weight between the left and right arms.
So if the right sword was knocked powerfully outward at that moment…
"!"
Susamikado prioritized keeping its balance and let go of the sword in its right hand.
It also leaned back and to the right.

Susamikado had no sword or shield, so Tatsumi did not hesitate.

With a snap of the right wrist, she raised the sword diverted by Susamikado's shield.

"How about this?"

She asked that question while thrusting the sword tip toward Susamikado's throat.

Immediately afterwards, she saw Susamikado move.

It raised its now-shieldless left arm.

"…!"

And it caught the approaching sword in that palm.

There was no sound, but there was destruction.

The blade pierced through the god of war's left hand.

It plunged in up to the base, but…

"!?"

Susamikado's left hand grabbed the sword's guard and Typhon's right hand beyond it.

Typhon's right sword and hand were crushed.

And this time, Susamikado's hand reached Typhon.

Tatsumi saw the machine clench its right fist.

It can't be, she thought.

It had let go of its sword and it had leaned back and to the right as if keeping its balance, but…

"Was that all to pull back your right fist!?"

There was nothing to hide behind in this space, so she clearly saw the metal fist as it was launched.

The strike seemed to flicker as it flew toward her.

Its target was Typhon's face right next to her.

She realized she could not block this one.

Nor could she negate its force now that Hiba and Mikage could turn that against her.

She could not take this blow.

But neither could she avoid it with Typhon's hand held.

"Then I'll have to go with this!!"

Tatsumi raised Typhon's left arm.

The left blade shot up from below and severed Typhon's own right arm.

Typhon could now move back, so it started to take that first step. Except…

…If I escape…!

Tatsumi hesitated.

If she escaped here, she would undoubtedly get by without losing.

But…

…Can I really do that!?

Just as she asked herself that, two things stopped her from moving back.

Those things were noise and light.

A noise from the sky seemed to penetrate this space.

“Tatsumi!”

It was Alex’s voice.

However, that voice from above was not the only one she heard.

She heard more from the distant mechanical dragons lying on the forest floor.

“No running away!”

They belonged to Heo Thunderson and the powerless ones.

“Fire!!”

She saw a light.

One of the broken dragons had lifted its upper body and opened its mouth.

The light was its main cannon.

“…!!”

It was directed into the space behind her.

She did not know if it had been poorly aimed or if they had no real intention of hitting her, but it was clear what they were trying to do while frantically fleeing from the dragon as it was blown backwards by the recoil.

…They’re keeping me here.

Thank you, she thought as she stopped after only moving back one of Typhon’s legs.

She then shifted to dodging by focusing on her own movements.

She tried to avoid the fist by leaning back.

It worked.

The metal fist shot by just thirty-two centimeters in front of her.

And just as Susamikado’s right fist was going to pass before her eyes, she almost thought she heard Susamikado yell something.

No, she had heard it.

“Keravnos!”

That was 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core weapon.

Susamikado did not have that Tartaros pile driver equipped.

Keravnos was currently inside Noah.

But something did open before Tatsumi’s eyes.

It was the entrance to the Concept Space that acted as a hangar.

The opened space threatened to swallow Tatsumi.

“What!?”

Acting on reflex, she drew the sword on her back.

“…!”

She defended herself by striking the concept space with her blade and absorbing its power.

Just as the opening concept space was swallowed by the blade, she saw Susamikado’s arm flying past her.

She felt some relief at having survived, but…

…Oh, no.

She realized she had made a grave error.

She realized that this attack had been one of the goals that Hiba, Mikage, or both had seen in this battle.

“Don’t tell me…”

Tatsumi gasped, raised her Cowling Sword, and faced forward.

She looked past Susamikado and its fist and she looked to the people on the path through the forest.

A certain girl stood among them.

Her blue eyes were staring directly Tatsumi’s way and her mouth was already open.

“Please come out,” she shouted to the sky. “Thunder Fellow!!”

The response to her cry came from Tatsumi’s hand.

Her Cowling sword had sealed the power to open a concept space and that meant one thing.

…I’ve created an exit for what I sealed with this same power before!

It burst out.

It appeared of its own accord from the Cowling Sword’s blade.

It was a heavily armored blue and white mechanical dragon.

It was Thunder Fellow.

●

Heo and Harakawa were instantly taken within Thunder Fellow.

Before they had time to breathe, their vision was pointed skyward.

Something was descending toward them.

It was a mechanical dragon colored red, white, and blue.

Its entire body was heated by the air’s friction.

It was Alex.

Thunder Fellow briefly stopped twenty meters above ground to face him.

Thunder Fellow opened all of his accelerators and checked on them as if waving his tail.

He then performed a roll while still positioned vertically.

“My output is all green.”

“I see you’re well-prepared,” commented Harakawa.

Heo nodded as she entered the back seat.

“Thank goodness.”

All the others were on the surface behind them.

Those people had brought them this far.

They were all looking up and waving: the scarf-wearing mountain unit commander, the sand dune regiment with mohawks or masks, and the American UCAT members in blue armored uniforms.

They were all waving.

“U-um, you’re going to be blown away by the accelerators!”

They all scattered.

But as they looked back over their shoulders, they were smiling.

Someone told her to get going, so she smiled.

It's time to go, she thought from the bottom of her heart.

Her destination was the airspace above.

That was a place only dragons could go.

Heo sat in the back seat and waited to combine with Thunder Fellow.

But first, Harakawa tossed something to her from the front seat.

It was contained in red cloth packaging.

"Broiled chestnuts."

"Munch on that while you're inside. Do it outside and you'll gain weight."

"I-I can't eat while combined with Thunder Fellow!"

"Actually, Heo," said Thunder Fellow. "I could take them in with you and place them inside your digestive system."

"Sorry, but you're supposed to taste things with your tongue, not your stomach."

She heard Harakawa laugh quietly at that.

"Well, whatever," he said. "Let's go. How about it, Heo Thunderson?"

"Are you inviting me to go?"

"No. You're the one that decides to go and I'm the one who drives. It's just that you always take so long that I end up having to rush you along. So I'm going to say it again today, Heo Thunderson: Let's go."

She thought about what he meant and she realized it meant she would not be left behind anymore.

And that led to a single answer.

"Testament."

She looked up into the sky.

"Let's go."

She spoke into that sky.

"Let's go to that absolute place where our answer lies!!"

●

Immediately afterwards, everyone spread out across the Mt. Ikoma region saw a line of blue light fly up towards the center of the night sky.

At the same time, the mechanical dragons in that black sky spread out.

They were opening a path for the blue light passing between them.

And something pursued that that blue light.

A red light flew in from below and tore a straight line through the sky.

Everyone watched as the blue and red lights rose into the heavens.

They watched those lights approach an airspace they could never reach.

●

Tatsumi watched Alex ascend once more, but she only did so for an instant.

Susamikado was still moving before her.

Without pulling back its right arm, Susamikado made a full rotation to make

its next attack.

In the silence, Tatsumi used her left hand to raise the sword that had produced Thunder Fellow.

Susamikado was about to complete its rotation in front of her.

It had pulled back its right hand again and had twisted its body around to the limit to launch the attack.

Come, thought Tatsumi.

"I will knock you back however many times it takes."

She gathered strength in her body and moved her right hand to have Typhon raise its left sword.

She planned to strike her enemy's fist with the blade.

But…

"Oh, they're white."

With those words, her skirt was lifted to waist height behind her.

●

It had happened suddenly.

Tatsumi had been so focused on what was in front of her that she was slow to react and hesitated.

"…!?"

As if brushing off her waist, she moved back to the right, pushed down her skirt, and lowered her hips.

She then looked towards Typhon's left shoulder.

She saw someone there.

"Ryuuji."

"That's twice today."

He was three meters away.

He had to be here for the same reason as before.

It had happened while she was distracted by the fist and the failed summoning of Keravnos and while she was confused by Thunder Fellow's summoning.

…He had Susamikado turn its back and then released his combination.

She saw Susamikado continue to rotate and…

"——————"

As wind gently wrapped around it, it came to a stop.

Its movements were now feminine.

The one who piloted it for combat was standing in front of her.

Hiba gave her a trouble smile and took a step forward.

Tatsumi held her Cowling Sword in both hands with her hips still lowered.

"Wai-…"

She started to say "wait" until she realized something.

She remembered this layout.

This was the same as ten years before.

Back then, everyone had evacuated to the gate which had stopped functioning

and those without defensive philosopher's stones had started collapsing, one after another.

Tatsumi had been given a defensive stone by her parents.

…So I alone was fine.

The sky had split open and the earth had shattered while all the others had fallen to the ground in groans of pain.

She had wanted to do something, but there had been nothing to do.

Because she alone had survived, she had decided to protect the others until the end.

After all, she had the power to fight.

And then *he* had arrived.

He had been an enemy.

He had said he was there to save them, but she had not known if he really was there to help or not.

She had not been able to judge anything about the situation.

She had suspected he might cause further damage to the people whose demise was only a matter of time.

So…

"N-…"

Hiba approached.

She swung her head.

She realized she had started trembling at some point and she could not stop it.

"No…"

She thrust out her sword as a way of telling him to stay back.

"No!"

But he still entered within range of the danger.

And so she changed her display of rejection to something else.

"…!!"

She stabbed.

She thrust the blade straight forward into Hiba's right side.

Her footing was weak and the sword did not pick up much speed, but…

"——————"

The blade pierced through his side and out his back.

●

The sword was incredibly sharp.

Its tip stabbed through its target with no sound or resistance.

…Eh?

Tatsumi seemed to stumble as she stared dumbfounded at what she had done.

She held a hilt in her hands.

A guard was attached to the top of the hilt and that guard was pressed against Hiba's stomach.

She had stabbed him.

“Ah…”

No, she thought. *Why?* she added.

Why didn’t he dodge? Did he not think I would stab him? What was he thinking?

The questions in her heart were a refrain of those from ten years before.

Her former doubts were revived.

She felt it clearly in her hands, but…but why?

…Why didn’t you dodge!?

As soon as she asked that silent question, she heard something.

“I see…”

It was a troubled voice that was clearly putting up with some pain.

It was Hiba’s.

But Tatsumi could not bear to look at him. No matter what expression he had on his face, it would be a reaction to what she had just done.

She could only hang her head and two things entered her field of vision: Hiba’s hands.

The boy’s hands touched hers that still held the hilt.

Taken aback, she tried to let go but instead clamped down from the tension.

Nevertheless, Hiba’s hands removed hers from the hilt.

And after peeling away her hands, he spoke.

“There, everything is going to be okay now.”

That was much like what someone had said ten years before.

“———!”

He reached below her arms and lifted her up.

The shorter boy somehow managed to lift her weakened body.

“Everything is going to be okay.”

She snapped back at his words.

“H-how is this okay!?”

She squeezed her hands tight and hit him.

Her clenched fists hit the head and shoulders she could see below.

She hit him again and again, telling him to let go.

“How can you say that?”

She struck him.

“You might die!”

With those words, tears poured from the corners of her eyes and they would not stop.

“You’re going to die!”

“I-I’m not dead.”

“But…”

She hit him as her mouth and face tearfully twisted.

“When your father was stabbed in the same way…!”

“I’m not dead!!”

“But…”

“I’m not dead!!”

His shout stopped her from moving.

She breathed out and the built-up tears fell from her eyes.

She sniffled and saw Hiba hanging his head.

Without wiping away the tears, she spoke with a tremor in her voice.

“He died…”

“It’s true my dad died,” he said. “He was stabbed through the gut and some of his organs were hit. That had to have been a lethal injury…if nothing was done.”

“——————”

Tatsumi was left briefly speechless by those final words and Hiba’s voice seemed to follow her silence.

“Am I dead right now?”

She looked to him when she heard that question.

And finally…

“No.”

“Right?” he replied before sighing.

Then something red spilled from where her sword had stabbed him.

His sigh had relaxed his tension and opened the tightened blood vessels.

“Ah…”

She was nearly panicked, but he shook his head.

“My dad didn’t do anything about it afterwards.”

Because…

“He had something he had to do and he gave that priority. He had something he found more important than being stabbed by you.”

Tatsumi listened to him speak with his head lowered.

“Do you understand?”

She heard that question and then more.

These were the words of the answerer she had waited so long for.

“I am not going to die. I still have to flirt a whole lot more with Mikage-san and master several different paths, so I will not die. And if my dad hadn’t had something he had to prioritize over his own death…he wouldn’t have died either!”

So…

“You don’t get to take credit for what his own decisions led to!!”

Tatsumi tried to say something, but something else left her before her voice: tears.

…*Why?*

She needed to argue back and she needed to say she had killed him, so why could she not speak?

As she wondered why, she found the answer in her heart.

…*Because these are the words of my other self?*

As she thought, she looked up into the heavens to hold back the tears.

This was the sky near Osaka and it looked a lot like the night sky she had seen in the past.

She had been there, the parents she had lost had been there, and they had all looked up into that sky as they walked home from the store.

Hadn't she constantly asked them a certain question?

…What kind of person do you think my other self is?

Her father had reached below her arms and picked her up.

After comforting her from her fear of the height, he had given her the same answer he had given her so often before.

…I'm sure he's a lot like you.

She distinctly remembered him telling her that.

His sex, age, and height were different from her own, but he had come this far, he used the same technique as her, and…

"——————"

She released her voice into the sky above.

It sounded a lot like the cries of a newborn.

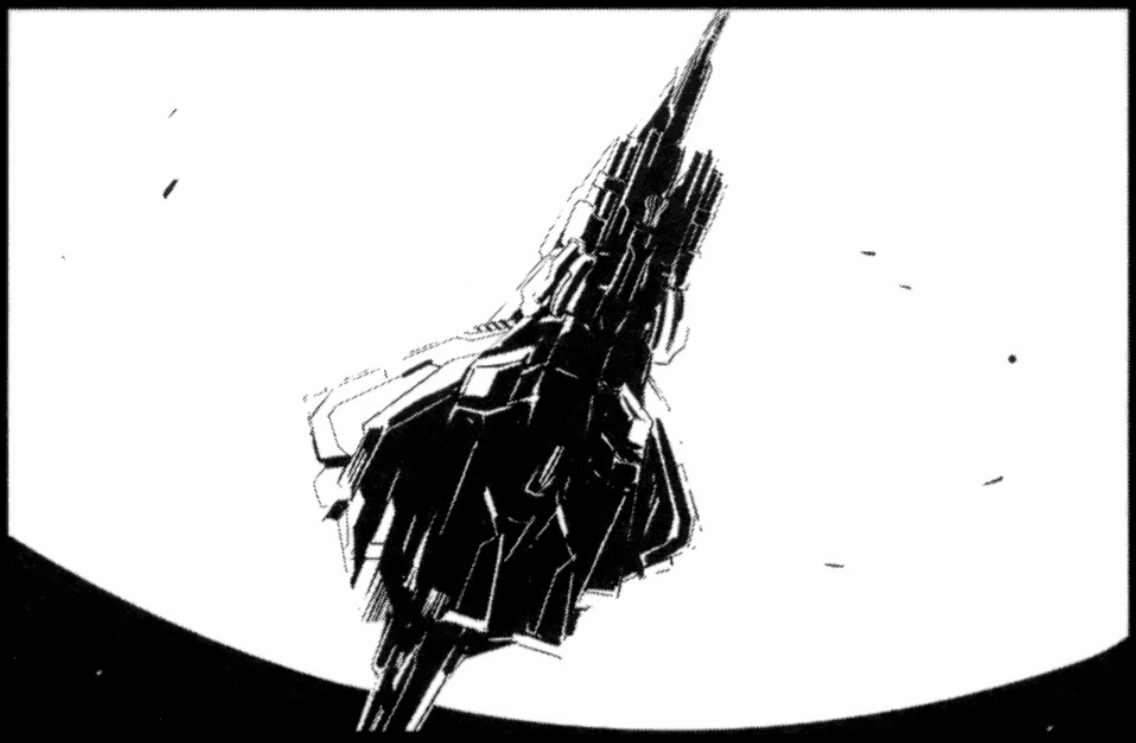
And as the reverberation of her throat faded into the sky above, a battle raged there.

Babel's light had yet to fully activate.

The battle was not over yet.

Chapter 7

“Voice of the Just One”



Say your answer
You say
Your answer in your calling

●

The sky was an infinite expanse.

To fly, one only needed acceleration.

An increase in speed increased the resistance from the thick atmosphere.

It felt like digging through piled-up snow.

One spoke with acceleration there and it allowed movement in any direction.

If airspace was seen as a place of invisible resistance, then everyone there was a resister.

And Heo was currently resisting that sky.

Her body was in high-speed mobility form.

Her wings were half closed and she flew toward the heavens as if leaning back.

She made a large turn in the great heights to shift from a vertical rise into a descent.

An enemy pursued her from behind.

A stream of bullets flew her way and she was cutting through them with her turn.

After rotating around, she needed to get behind the enemy.

…But I'm so heavy.

She was already moving quickly and the turn was a fight against her inertial weight.

The great speed increased her weight several times over.

Her body shook from the air resistance and she could only hear a great roar in her ears.

Her frame creaked and she lightly hopped through the gaps in the wind.

She was moving at blinding speed.

She thought her entire body would be knocked down into her belly that was pointed toward heaven.

She had used 5th-Gear's concept to set forwards as "down", but that did not eliminate the inertial forces of the turn.

The wind captured her body and tried to drag her into its raging stream, but she resisted.

She was constantly resisting.

She viewed herself as a blade sticking into a muddy stream and she sliced through the turbulent air.

"Nn…"

Her wings were blades and her body was the helm.

She read the course of the wind, kept it from carrying her away, and cut sharply into it so she did not collide with it.

Her upwards momentum made it difficult to obtain downward thrust, but…

"Nn…!!"

As she leaned backwards, the tips of her wings caught the air.

She rode that air and turned.

She saw the pursuing bullets scatter into the sky above.

Immediately afterwards, her senses detected a certain presence.

Alex had just shot up past her.

Their relative speeds meant their passing truly only lasted an instant.

The red light of acceleration was undoubtedly flying in search of greater heights.

This meant it was her turn to pursue.

At the same time, she heard Harakawa as his body shook from the centrifugal force.

“Heo, let’s go after him!!”

“Right!” she replied.

She bent back her jaw, extended her back, and brought air to her lungs.

“Nn…!”

She kicked at the air like it was water and instantly oriented herself upwards.

The sky was there and the points of starlight acted as the backdrop for the residual light of the accelerators.

That was Alex.

She pursued him. She used the centrifugal force of her three-dimensional turn to launch herself skyward.

Her acceleration had a target: herself and her other self.

“Here we go!!”

She threw herself forward.

Her enemy fired a barrage behind him and their relative speeds made it a wall of accelerated bullets.

She did not care.

She reached out a hand to pinpoint the locations of the destructive projectiles with her fingertips.

And she avoided them.

She shot forward, turned, and folded up her wings to slip through the straight lines and attacking smoke.

When she struck the air, it turned to spray and her body shook as if to keep her from making any minor adjustments to her movement.

But she knew one way of controlling that shaking.

She could accelerate forward to eliminate it.

And she did so.

While slipping through the roaring barrage, she chose acceleration as her way of ensuring proper control.

Now the shaking only came from the tail end. It was nothing but speed to push her onward.

She wished to reach even greater heights. Barrage or not, she simply wanted to continue upwards.

The heavens could be found nowhere else, so she accelerated.

She seemed to be showing off her acceleration to the surface.

She tore through the cold air in pursuit of the red acceleration light up ahead.

She saw the red light turn toward the western sky.

Threads of mist trailed from the tips of the mechanical dragon's wings and those moonlit threads made their way to the white tower reaching toward the heavens.

Her enemy had chosen Babel's surface as their battlefield.

That battlefield was a vertical drop off from fifteen kilometers up.

●

Those still on the surface could see the light.

While providing first aid for Hiba's wound, Mikage saw two powers rapidly dropping from the heavens.

She also saw the white tower rising high into the sky.

The pair of powers dropped toward that tower's surface.

The powers drew lines.

Those twin beasts drew two white lines through the night sky.

They were vapor trails.

The two of them repeatedly intersected and dropped down.

They would sometimes separate, make a circuit of the tower, collide on the other side, and then collide again on this side.

The white trails would occasionally swell out.

…That's their acceleration.

That battle had reached speeds Susamikado could not hope to match.

Heo wished for the speed and Harakawa provided it.

Even the initial speed of gravitational acceleration meant nothing to them as they descended.

"Don't worry," muttered Mikage.

She was speaking to the white and blue dragon of the two machines accelerating toward the earth.

"Don't worry!"

After all…

"You're the one that defeated Black Sun!!"

●

Alex flew along Noah's armor on his way down to the surface.

He was using his full strength.

Threads of mist trailed from every leading point on his armor and his own movements left an afterimage behind them.

But something was catching up to and biting at the white trail behind him.

It was Thunder Fellow.

His enemy had kept her position behind him, he could not shake her, and she was using her speed to catch up.

What an absurd enemy, he thought.

Alex knew Noah.

He had lived inside it.

The layout of its surface portion was contained in his memories, so he knew where the walls and corridors were.

His enemy on the other hand knew nothing.

But despite knowing nothing, she was fearlessly pursuing him.

It would be easy to call it reckless.

It would be difficult to call it courageous.

But Alex instead thought of her as insane.

If she was reckless, she would back off once she made a mistake.

If she was courageous, she would keep her distance from a battlefield that put her at such a disadvantage.

But she readily flew into this place.

She had acceleration and flight.

She had movement and mobility.

She simply trusted in those powers and attempted to surpass him.

And so he accelerated.

He slipped through the gaps in the residences and actuators on Noah's surface, split the narrow air, flew along Noah's armor, and threw on even more speed.

He was entirely focused on his flight.

He seemed to be saying he was the one that belonged above this nostalgic battlefield.

But he heard something from the rumbling of the air that refused to leave him.

His rear sight could see it.

Thunder Fellow had stumbled over a rise in Noah's surface residences.

But despite stumbling, the dragon did not flee.

It remained on the same path, pursuing Alex.

It only had to accelerate to make up for the lost speed and it relied on its strength to continue its flight.

…Such…

He spoke aloud.

"Such a villainous and inelegant flight!!"

He had to defeat this enemy.

He could hear a crying voice from the surface.

Those were Tatsumi's tears.

Who had made her cry?

No, he knew the answer. There was a single obvious reason for her tears.

…Because my justice was lacking!!

No matter the reason, no matter the interpretation, and no matter the emotions, the power of justice had to silence a child's tears and send them on to

the next sequence.

It did not matter if they were crying over their own crimes and what they had lost.

“Justice is what rids the world of even those tears!!”

Alex remembered when he had wished to be a hero.

Heroes were what had rid him of his tears when his parents had not returned and he was left all alone.

Someone had told him that heroes only existed on TV.

But that was wrong.

That nonsense reasoning was what only existed on TV.

Heroes could exist in reality.

…It’s just that everyone else gives up!

One only had to say a certain phrase – one little phrase – no matter the circumstances and even in public.

“I wish to keep others from crying!”

Once he said it, he would be able to act on it.

And so he did act on it and he fought.

He raised his speed and pointed his cannons toward his pursuing enemy.

“Enemy! Will you obstruct my justice!?”

But his enemy kept coming.

The blue and white mechanical dragon seemed to be racing more than flying.

It stacked acceleration on top of acceleration like a young bird flapping its wings in order to reach the sky.

The blue and white dragon flew swiftly across the Top-Gear construction.

It was fast.

As if pressing in on and distorting the air, it shot forward and nearly into arm’s reach.

“————!”

As soon as he realized his enemy was alongside him, Alex heard a voice.

“Why!?”

It was a girl’s voice, Heo Thunderson’s voice.

She asked her question with strength behind her voice.

“Why?”

Her question reached him.

“Why do you try to keep others from crying!?”

“That should be obvious!!”

Alex had his body rush forward and downward.

“That is where my justice lies!”

●

Heo thought to herself while placing her body on the forefront of her speed.

…That’s wrong!

Her thought of rejection was directed at Alex’s words.

She felt exhausted, as if she were running out of oxygen.

Her moving parts were tense and she felt she would lose control and trip if she relaxed her focus.

She had run full speed all this way with this unfamiliar battlefield as her track.

The great exhaustion of her tension was also exhausting Thunder Fellow.

But her thoughts were clear.

She was flying. She was clearly in flight.

Her confidence that she was in a position of absolute freedom brought clarity to her and her opponent's wills.

And that allowed her to make a statement she normally could not have.

…That's wrong!

Her mind raised a powerful rejection to the justice Alex spoke of.

"Justice is keeping people from crying? That…that can't be right!"

After all…

"Whenever I cried I kept crying!!"

Yes. That was how it had always been for her.

But Alex gave her an answer from the forefront of the wind.

"That is because there was no justice around you!!"

His dignified statement gave Heo a thought.

…That may be true.

But, she also thought.

There was a word in her heart that she was not sure if she could call "justice".

"Then…"

She waited the span of a breath before shouting.

"Then why was I able to run again!?"

She accelerated as if pulled onwards by the question.

She bit at the bearer of justice, demanding he give her an answer.

"No one ever stopped my tears!"

She had only had a single truth.

She yelled what she could call her past experience.

"Instead, everyone gave me a certain something!"

"And what was that!?"

That was an easy question to answer, so she released the words in her heart like a bullet.

"The ability to choose for myself! It was nothing more than that!!"

Her cry was immediately followed by approaching darkness.

The metal darkness appearing overhead was Noah's lower armor.

There was a vast hangar below the armor and it was located quite near the ground.

Heo thought she knew what it was.

…Noah's mechanical dragon launch zone!?

It was two kilometers long and at least five hundred meters wide.

The thin, flat exit was located straight ahead.

The ground was visible past that exit and there was less than a kilometer until she reached it.

"…!"

She had already run around a dozen kilometers from the top of the massive tower.

She had flown the entire way with a focus on acceleration.

If she did not begin an ascent immediately after leaving the exit, she would crash into the ground before she could rid herself of her speed.

She gasped for just a moment.

Her body was approaching its limits from the exhaustion of the run, so…

…Shouldn't I slow down here to avoid crashing into the-…

But that was when she saw Alex's acceleration light grow in front of her.

He had added on more speed.

"————!"

He had eloquently told her what he intended to do.

If he moved ahead and left the exit, she would lose sight of him in an instant.

Lagging behind was dangerous and the greater the distance between them, the greater that danger.

She realized she could only pull up closer to him, but…

…No.

Her next words seemed to reject her own timidity.

"I can't just pull up closer to him. I have to pass him!"

She breathed in.

Her body was growing stiff.

She briefly shrank down, thinking this would be her final run.

And she suddenly raised her hips, directed all of her acceleration backwards, and blasted it all out toward the sky.

"Here I go!"

She launched herself forward.

●

Two speeds raced through the two kilometer tunnel.

Both of them had already broken the sound barrier.

The large tunnel's ceiling was thirty meters high.

For a mechanical dragon, a light jump would hit it.

The only options for those two speeds were horizontal or straightforward movement.

The leading speed, Alex, fired on Thunder Fellow who was pursuing him.

The enemy had approached too much for this great speed.

Thunder Fellow passed by the homing bullets before their homing capability could kick in.

Alex could not rely on bullets here.

The only effective attacks were the lightning from the pairs of secondary

cannons on his left and right sides.

His red lightning pursued Thunder Fellow with quick whip-like motion.

Thunder Fellow fired bluish-white lightning from his own secondary cannons.

Amid the darkness, atop their speed, and below their straight down trajectory, the two machines fired barrages of light and accelerated to evade.

They swung to either side as if being knocked back and they tilted their bodies until they were very nearly scraping against the floor.

“…!”

Each time either one locked on, they would fire their lethal attacks.

They never let up.

Their enemy’s attacks would fire, approach, and arrive too close to know for sure they could avoid it.

“————!”

And they would fire their own attacks.

The bright lightning intersected between them and the world exploded with light.

They left the noise and explosions behind.

Theirs was a world of speed, shadow, blue, and red.

Even the scattering fragments of the floor and ceiling were left behind.

They accelerated.

They accelerated to the very limit.

But Alex saw something.

The enemy was gradually approaching behind him.

Impossible, he thought.

The ground was approaching from below.

Alex accelerated without fearing a collision with that solid ground.

He had no intention of going easy on her, and yet…

…Why is she catching up!?

That was when he realized Thunder Fellow was leaning forward.

…What is that?

That was not the pose of someone who simply did not fear crashing into the ground.

“Does she see the surface as her goal!?”

The enemy was not even looking at him. She had even stopped firing on him.

Heo Thunderson, the girl who had combined with Thunder Fellow, had most likely made a certain decision: she would run and win.

Her goal was the surface and he was only a fellow runner.

…She’s insane!

Alex filled his heart with the desire to accelerate and clenched his metal fangs.

…Does she see this high-speed battle as no different from a footrace!?

However, she was not looking his way.

She was only looking at what she had decided was her goal.

She was looking in a straight line.

Thunder Fellow accelerated as they entered the second half of the tunnel.

This second half was the last spurt.

Thunder Fellow broke through the air it was pushing forward and its blue and white form appeared to shake.

Alex's calculations told him she would pass him in an instant, so he attacked.

He did what he needed to as a fellow runner on this battlefield.

And he did not go easy on her.

He forcibly rolled his body and pointed his belly toward the ceiling.

"Here goes!!"

Turned upside down, he raced along the ceiling.

This was a dangerous decision.

Unlike the launch zone's floor, the upper surface was covered in piping and air conditioning ducts.

And it was all wrapped in darkness.

But Alex had decided that would be his floor.

He needed to fly along there to fire from the multi-shot container on his back.

At this speed, his homing bullets were left behind before they could recognize the enemy, but what would happen if he scattered bullets from the ceiling?

A wall of bullets would appear before Thunder Fellow as it flew along the floor.

This would work given their speed and the low ceiling.

Alex could see the shadows of the pipes and outcroppings below him. He also saw internal communication antennae.

If he hit any one of them, he would be blown away.

But he would not hit them.

Justice would not hit them.

He preserved himself by flying just barely out of the way.

He stayed on a straight line while slipping past it all.

The wind and noise of his passing caused the antennae, deactivated lights, and other ceiling structures to split and burst.

Shards of glass fell like rain and reflected the lightning that the two of them continued firing.

It's like the ocean spray, thought Alex. *Such a pleasant scattering.*

The tunnel's exit was visible up ahead.

Immediately afterwards, the enemy arrived.

The enemy sank down in order to pass him.

And she did so from directly behind him.

There was less than fifteen meters of space between Alex and the floor, but Thunder Fellow was trying to slip through that gap.

Both mechanical dragons were about ten meters tall, so they would have to hug the floor to prevent a near miss.

But despite moving at supersonic speeds at that altitude, Thunder Fellow sank

even further down.

…She really is insane!!

His enemy had cast aside her fear.

She was only looking at her goal and that fact sent a chill to Alex's mind.

…Can justice not get through to her?

As if to answer him, Thunder Fellow accelerated even further.

Alex's scans confirmed that Thunder Fellow threw more acceleration behind itself while flying only fifteen centimeters off the floor.

She was coming and not from the side.

She was coming straight in as if to face him. She wished to unmistakably overtake him.

She had done more than say it all came down to speed.

Her flight had thrown away everything except for speed.

This was a time of battle, and yet she was fighting through speed alone.

In that case, thought Alex as he gave his response.

He fired the bullets from his back.

"———!!"

Not even his own ears heard the attack name.

All sound was swept behind them as the barrage flew backwards as if he had overturned a bucket.

He scored a direct hit.

●

The scarlet flames looked like a line of light.

The object they had struck was moving so quickly that the explosion was deflected and stretched out.

Alex saw his enemy beyond the multiple flashing lights that resembled firecrackers.

It was a mechanical dragon's silhouette.

It appeared after pushing through the light and smoke.

Just to make sure, Alex fired on it.

The red lightning swept through the air, split open the exploding light, and tore into the shadow.

The twin lightning strikes tore through the silhouette which was trying to break free of the smoke.

Both red lightning bolts struck, electrical discharges and sparks flew, and the shadow shook.

"!!"

It finally collided with the floor.

That collision during their high-speed fall caused it to bounce high.

That was when it broke free of the smoke.

…It isn't Thunder Fellow!?

Alex instead saw a collection of framework that closely resembled a

mechanical dragon.

“Did she throw forward one of her other frames as a shield!?”

Confused, Alex looked more closely and saw something slip below the normal cruising frame that had bounced up and stabbed into the ceiling.

The blue and white silhouette moved forward.

“Thunder Fellow!”

Alex then saw Thunder Fellow’s opened mouth turned his way.

The dragon’s roar tore into everything.

It closely resembled a racer’s cry of effort.

“————!!”

The roar then produced light.

At the same time, the bluish-white main cannon tore through Alex.

●

Heo saw the attack hit.

She had defeated her other self. She had defeated that high-speed flight-style heavy mechanical dragon that advocated justice.

Beyond the explosion of light, his armor was blown away and smashed to pieces.

…I won…

I won?

Her dumbfounded heart quickly sapped all strength from her body.

She entrusted everything to the speed she was riding.

“…”

She started to breathe a sigh of relief, but…

“Look again!”

Harakawa’s voice awoke her senses.

Before she could ask what he meant, she saw it and heard Harakawa explain it.

“We didn’t hit him!”

Fragments flew their way from beyond the destructive light, but they had not been smashed from his body.

“He purged his armor to use it as a shield! He shot it toward us like a bullet!”

The result was clear.

She felt the great pressure of a presence behind her.

That was her enemy.

He had purged his armor and instantly circled behind them.

A few pieces of the destroyed armor had taken the main cannon blast, deflected it, and produced a smokescreen of light.

The few remaining pieces flew their way like shells.

“————!!”

They collided with her.

The enemy’s armor struck her right shoulder, left arm, lower chest on both

sides, right stomach, right upper leg, and left lower leg.

It hurt as bad as a hit from a hammer.

Before she could think, she had flown out of the tunnel.

She was thrown out into empty air and she had lost control due to the armor shells.

She rotated in three dimensions and saw the sky for just a moment.

In that moment, the color red filled the center of her vision.

That was Alex's main cannon.

The now lighter mechanical dragon let out a roar.

"…!"

And it slammed Heo straight into the ground.

●

The battlefield on the moonlit earth was filled with something that shined.

A giant tower sat at the center of the wide field and the light falling on the ground there was the moonlight reflected off of wreckage. The wreckage came from dolls.

Those white, humanoid forms were strewn across the ground after having been destroyed in every way imaginable.

Some just lay there, some had been skewered, some had large gouges torn from them, and some had been crushed.

There was a pattern to their destruction.

First, the wires connecting their joints were cut and then bullets or explosives were fired or shoved into the entrances and exits for those wires.

The technique required high precision and speed.

But more dolls yet remained. Nearly three digits' worth surrounded the tower from a distance.

Their gazes were all focused on one point.

A few figures stood in front of the tower, protecting its entrance.

They were maid automatons and the central one had a machinegun floating to either side of her.

Counting the red-haired one wielding the machineguns, there were three.

Injured maids were sleeping in the coolers placed behind them.

They no longer had handguns floating around them.

Their only weapons were knives with chipped blades and their other guns.

The one on the left opened her mouth.

She had lost her right shoulder and she spoke to the red-haired automaton.

"I will create a diversion, #8-sama."

"No, you will not."

#8 used her gravitational control to swap out ammunition belts while giving that dignified response.

A case hung down from the ammunition belt she dragged from the cooler.

The case fell to the ground, now empty.

But #8 looked around regardless.

“The enemy is numerous, but if we avoid any unnecessary attacks and focus our efforts…”

As soon as she said that, the maid to her right, whose left hand was destroyed, narrowed her eyes and spoke.

“Here they come!”

#8 turned in that maid’s direction and saw the forest shaking.

A moment later, a wall of wind reached her.

New dolls appeared, seemingly born from the forest surrounding the plain.

#8 frowned.

“More of them?”

“No,” said the maid to her right with a shake of her head. “They are not the only ones coming.”

There was also a giant figure.

A giant doll appeared, towering above the trees of the forest.

This was one of the same large dolls that had approached Japanese UCAT on the night of the Army’s attack.

The doll held a giant sashimi knife in each hand and it was nearly ten meters tall.

This was a remote-controlled doll the size of a god of war.

“——————”

#8 calculated out the enemy’s strength and compared it to their own.

“I see.”

The other two automatons turned toward her.

“#8-sama?”

She nodded and responded while closing her shared memory

“You two retreat along with those behind us.”

“Why!?”

The answer was simple.

“My duty is to protect.”

“W-we can also-…”

“No,” said #8 to cut them off. She looked back and forth between the other two. “My duty is to protect my master. You have yet to find your masters, so go. I desire to remain here. That is what I have determined.”

Her words were accompanied by a great sound from the sky.

She looked up and saw two mechanical dragons flying along Babel’s surface.

The automatons’ eyes saw exactly what happened.

Thunder Fellow was hit by Alex’s main cannon and fell into the southern mountain range.

That mechanical dragon was Team Leviathan’s greatest individual strength, but it had been shot down.

The automatons on the left and right froze when they saw it, but #8 did not.

Expressionless, she took a slow step forward.

The two now behind her frantically turned her way, so she addressed them.

“What does it matter if the mechanical dragon was shot down? My master is still safe. And…”

She nodded.

“While they may fall to the earth, none of those around us will remain there.”

“_____”

“Now,” she said. “Go. You are in the way of my and my master’s master-servant relationship.”

She closed her eyes as she spoke and a slight pause followed.

Before long, she heard footsteps on either side behind her. They were stepping on the grass and moving away.

She heard them grab the coolers, but she heard nothing after that.

She had already rushed out to the battlefield.

●

Heo could not breathe.

She tried to move her belly to breathe, but the air would not enter her lungs.

She was lying on her back, but she did not know if she could move.

She simply trembled while facing the night sky.

She remembered the shaking and shock to her body.

She also remembered the fear.

That shaking and emotion reminded her what had happened.

She had purged her armor to reduce the force of the main cannon blast.

She had fallen, but in the instant of the crash, she had forcibly changed the direction in which she “fell” and avoided a direct hit with the earth.

The last thing she had seen was the forest slope and she did not know what had happened to her afterwards.

She sighed.

Long ago, her shoelace had come untied as she ran the hundred meters and she had tripped.

Just like now, she had not known what had happened to her and the shock had left her mind blank.

At the moment, she could tell the trees around her had all fallen, shimmering heat and thin smoke rose from her body, she had removed most of the armor that could be thought of as her clothes, and…

…There’s light.

Overhead, a red light in the heavens was slowly growing in intensity.

She did not understand what was happening, but she knew for certain that she would die if that red light continued to grow.

The word “death” easily came to mind.

She had accepted that word of ending because she no longer understood anything.

…It’s over.

She felt tears in her eyes and she felt like none of her would move, but this was not due to the fall.

…I lost.

She had given it everything she had, but it had not been enough.

She had rejected her opponent's justice, but she had not defeated him.

She felt her speed had not been enough to overtake him.

A single thought entered her mind.

…There's no point in moving anymore.

So she did not move.

It was not that she thought nothing of the red light that would soon be sent her way.

"But I lost…"

So there was nothing she could do.

But then…

"Heo."

She heard a voice.

"Heo Thunderson."

At first, she did not know whose voice it was and she briefly did not even realize it was her name being called.

But as soon as she realized both who the voice belonged to and whose name it was, the voice called again.

"Can you hear me, Heo Thunderson?"

It was Harakawa and she responded to him.

"Y-yes."

She forcefully took the breath she had been previously unable to take.

"Wh-what is it?"

"Well," he gently replied. "Are you going to die, Heo?"

"Eh?"

It shocked her that someone else – even someone so close to her – had guessed so perfectly what she was thinking.

"H-how did you know that?"

"Then listen carefully, Heo."

"Okay," she said just before she heard his next words.

"Get up."

●

Harakawa was stretched out on top of the upside-down pilot's seat.

He was being held there by gravitational control, so the grass and the distant forest looked upside down to him.

His legs were placed up on the console and his arms were behind his head in a pose of relaxation.

"Do as you wish, Heo," he said.

"A-as I wish…?"

He understood why she was so confused.

She was an active girl. She did not wish for a simple life like he did.

That active side of her gave her many things and expanded her world, but simplicity had its own strengths.

…If you're knocked down, you can live on in your simplicity and you don't think too much of it.

Both happiness and unhappiness were averaged out and you avoided both.

But Heo was different. She had harsh ups and harsh downs.

"This goes beyond bipolar disorder. You could probably call it the UCAT disorder."

"Wh-what are you talking about!?"

"Don't worry about it," he said.

And he had a thought: *What does it matter if you lose once or twice?*

He did not say it out loud, but he did say it in his heart.

…Some people can't even accept the challenge. Compared to that, what's so bad about losing?

She had not died.

Yes.

"Thunder Fellow and I stayed at the controls during the crash. We removed just the frame which made the whole thing more pliable and let most of the impact escape. Most of the armor was stripped away, but we protected everything necessary for flight and attack and the frame isn't even scratched."

Which meant…

"If you want to fly, you can fly. If you want to die, you can die. You can just as easily choose either action."

"B-but…"

Don't worry about it Heo Thunderson.

…This is a race.

Your enemy outdid you in the previous match, but that was on his battlefield.

"Hey," he asked. "What is your justice, Heo Thunderson?"

"Well…"

She hesitated to answer but finally spoke.

"Why do you always ask me so many questions?"

"That's simple. I don't have the answers, so that's my form of justice, Heo Thunderson. That's why I only ever ask someone who can reach the answer on their own."

"Eh?"

"I won't say it again. Don't forget it."

With that, he sat up and operated the communicator.

"Can you hear it?"

"H-hear what?"

I'll tell you.

"The ridiculous song of the ridiculous people seeking your justice."

After some static, she heard a song arriving over the communicator.

The American UCAT members were singing as they continued to fight.

“Can you hear it? That’s the American national anthem, ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’.”

She heard the song they sang to encourage themselves.

“Oh, say can you see by the dawn’s early light

“What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming?

“Whose broad stripes and bright stars thru the perilous fight,

“O’er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?

“And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air,

“Gave proof thru the night that our flag was still there.

“Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave

“O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?”

●

Heo saw something.

In the winter sky directly in front of her, the northern end was brighter.

She saw a certain light beyond the red light of death.

It was the North Star.

She remembered the meaning that star held for her.

…Once…

Once, a mechanical dragon had ascended toward that star.

That dragon had a heart and that was exactly why he had gone mad.

In the very end, he had asked her name and she had replied with the name of happiness.

…I answered him.

So, she thought.

“If I have my own brand of justice…”

She got up.

“If I do…!!”

She could not complete this lying down.

“It is not to keep people from crying!!”

She filled her body with strength and shook her own aching body.

“It is to ensure everyone’s happiness by watching over them and holding out your hand…”

She opened her mouth and filled her lungs with air.

“But letting them choose everything for themselves!!”

With that shout, she heard a voice.

“On your mark.”

It was a precious voice.

“Get set.”

It was the precious voice of someone precious.

“Go ahead!”

Just after he gave her a mental push forward, the red light in the heavens shot down towards the earth.

But just before it did, Heo flew.

She escaped the light of death and flew toward the center of the heavens.

She flew toward the star there.

Thunder Fellow ascended.

●

Alex realized his enemy had recovered.

His red main cannon scorched the air and swept across the earth, but its target was no longer there.

The blue and white mechanical dragon ascended along a spiraling path that seemed to wrap around the afterimage of the red light.

…*So she's coming!*

He opened the multi-shot container installed in his body and fired the bullets.

However, the enemy seemed to forcefully swing her body around as she bent the air and flew.

She rotated through the bullets, leaned back, and yet…

"————!!"

Her direct ascent made the space between them meaningless.

So Alex wished to continue their battle.

He lit up his accelerators.

From here on, having speed only put him on an even level with her.

The battle would occur in the heavens above.

Their speed had already turned every point in those heavens into an aerial battlefield.

A dragon's flight negated all distance.

The dragon below exposed its body in its ascent as if negating any time created by the distance between them.

Alex used all his strength to climb the slope into the heavens, but the pursuing blue and white form caught up in an instant.

…*Well done!*

"So this is your justice!"

He understood.

He had heard his enemy's earlier shout.

…*Happiness.*

Then what was happiness to his other self?

"————"

He looked across the heavens during his direct ascent.

He had a clear view.

The chill and shadows of night spread out in all three hundred sixty degrees and created a vast emptiness, but…

"Is it to bathe in this frigid freedom, Heo Thunderson!?"

Heo did not answer.

She simply displayed her speed and her ascent along a gouging arc.

She seemed to have grown even faster than before.

…*No.*

Before, they had been fought as they descended.

But this was different.

If they forgot to ascend, they would fall. If they did not constantly desire speed, they could not even remain where they were.

Heo Thunderson saw that as entirely natural.

She flew with even greater speed than when they had been falling. Her flight here was a fight against gravity and…

…*Has she gone insane in her resistance!?*

"No… Have you gone insane in your own happiness, Heo Thunderson!?"

●

They exchanged cannon blasts as their speeds collided and separated.

The bullets that missed their mark drew long arcs through the night sky.

The escaped speed became arcs of water vapor that decorated the night sky.

It was much like a high-speed dance.

They would approach their enemy but then move away to avoid that enemy's attacks.

There was evasion and attack.

The flying lightning strikes were like outstretched hands.

The rolling scissors used to avoid them were much like turns.

All the while, the two dragons raced up into the night sky.

The earth was visible down below.

They saw the night of this planet, this country, this mountainous region, and the surrounding cities.

There was light, there was flickering, there was movement, and people lived there.

The moonlight created a clear division between earth and sea and a different country's lights were visible beyond that sea.

This was a world with nothing to hear and everything to see.

The two mechanical dragons intersected their attacks and evasions in that world.

All the while, they ascended.

Their paths created a double helix which connected the earth below to the heavens above.

There was a single sound there.

It was a song.

A girl's voice sang a song of fluttering stars with her own meaning in mind.

"Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light."

She accelerated.

“What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming?”
White spray filled the sky and formed an arc.
“Whose broad stripes and bright stars thru the perilous fight.”
“Her rising power carried her into the heavens.
“O’er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?”
She stared directly at her enemy.
“And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air.”
She was catching up.
“Gave proof thru the night that our flag was still there.”
She moved in to capture him.
“Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave.”
It all came down to acceleration.
“O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?”
Heo pursued Alex through a sky of absolute freedom.

●

Heo attempted to fulfill her promise.

It was a one-sided promise. She had carved it into her heart when she had parted ways with a certain giant mechanical dragon.

…*“Become like these people”.*

“So I will stop you!”

She could see the blue and red mechanical dragon directly in front of her.

She let her body shake as she accelerated right up to him.

“…!”

Her thoughts no longer formed words.

She was too focused.

Her mind was filled with a list of words that did not qualify as language.

It was like a song created from a mix of emotion and memory.

She had heard before that sprinting finalists would enter a state near unconsciousness as they ran.

And if so, why did they run?

Because they wanted the result?

No. The goal was not the running. Running was something that only occurred while running.

In that case, why did they run as their consciousness faded? And why was she running now?

She did not know.

She did not even understand her current state.

She simply felt freedom in the pleasure of flight.

A mechanical dragon flew beyond the current of air ahead of her.

She heard a song in her heart as she reached out toward that dragon.

…*He is calling.*

He was calling and calling.

In this high-speed space where all things could go hand in hand, she was being called by the power that could bring the flower of destruction into bloom.

The flying bullets could not catch up and her reflecting defense was not enough.

Her speed was now as much a part of her as her own body.

Even her spirit was only a requirement needed to step onto the battlefield.

I can arrive there, but you are calling me to battle you there.

So it is my wings' duty to answer your call.

The answer awaits there.

Our answer, which is not a conclusion, awaits us there.

…It is waiting.

Heo no longer used her mind to think.

She let her mind scatter and simply felt. She sensed what the answer was.

And in the direction she wished for, she saw the stars, the sky…

"—————"

And her other self.

●

Alex forced himself through evasive action.

His body creaked and the wind roared.

However, his pain was rewarded by his enemy vanishing from before his eyes.

But just as he thought he had escaped, he realized the blue and white dragon was in the space behind him.

"—————!?"

She fired on him.

He avoided it.

He turned around and ascended.

But no matter what action he took, he could never see his enemy.

"—————"

She was always behind him.

He could feel it in the air currents. He could feel the pressure of a great flying object circling behind him and calmly ascending.

"H-…"

He just about asked "how", but his answer did not come in words. It came only as speed.

"!"

He was blown away by a shockwave.

Thunder Fellow had rapidly approached and used its gravitational control to slam its shockwave into him.

That attack used speed itself as a weapon.

Knocked away, Alex twisted around and regained control.

But by then, Thunder Fellow was already behind him.

"…!"

He heard Thunder Fellow saying something in a quiet voice.

It was a song.

He could not quite make it out, but it was definitely a song.

That song hit him.

As he was knocked away, he was hit again and again.

“————!!”

It would not stop.

In their spiraling ascent, the mechanical dragon was knocked into the heavens above.

Soon, an especially strong blow hit his belly.

“…”

He bent back and saw the heavens.

He saw a star there.

When he looked down, the blue and white dragon was charging up at him.

Its speed was now a straight line.

It almost seemed to be heading toward the star behind him.

…But I can’t afford to lose.

“To see my justice through to the end…”

He took a breath and opened his main cannon mouth.

“…I cannot abandon anyone to their tears!!”

He then heard a girl’s voice from below.

“You don’t know how people can stand back up in those situations!”

“Those are the words of the powerful!!”

He saw his other self speed up as if on reflex.

His other self left the planet of man behind and instead accelerated toward the lonely star in the sky.

He was nothing but one point in between.

Without listening to his words of protest any longer, that incarnation of acceleration continued on its collision course.

That speed let out a roar.

“I am not powerful! I just have times when I get a little bit stronger!”

And…

“The power that lets me do that…is my justice!”

Alex fired regardless.

His mind told him he had hit, but all he saw was a sharp arc of water vapor slicing through the sky.

Thunder Fellow flipped around in an evasion.

There was no fake, trick, feint, or strategy behind it.

His other self simply used her strength to force her way through.

She would detect the instant he fired and used her overwhelming thrust to evade.

A moment later, Alex realized she had collided with him.

He also heard a voice.

“What’s wrong with crying when you want to?”

He could feel his consciousness leaving him from the impact.

“If you do that, someone is sure to reach out to you.”

Alex suddenly remembered long ago when a girl who had always been strong had cried for the first time.

What had he done then?

…I took her hand.

He had had a different body back then, but…

…Will you still stop crying if I take your hand with this mechanical body?

If so, then his justice was…

“Is it the same, Heo Thunderson!?”

A deep impact seemed to answer him.

He saw a white line. He saw a single vapor trail flying toward the star in the center of the night sky.

He fell as he watched it leave.

“_____”

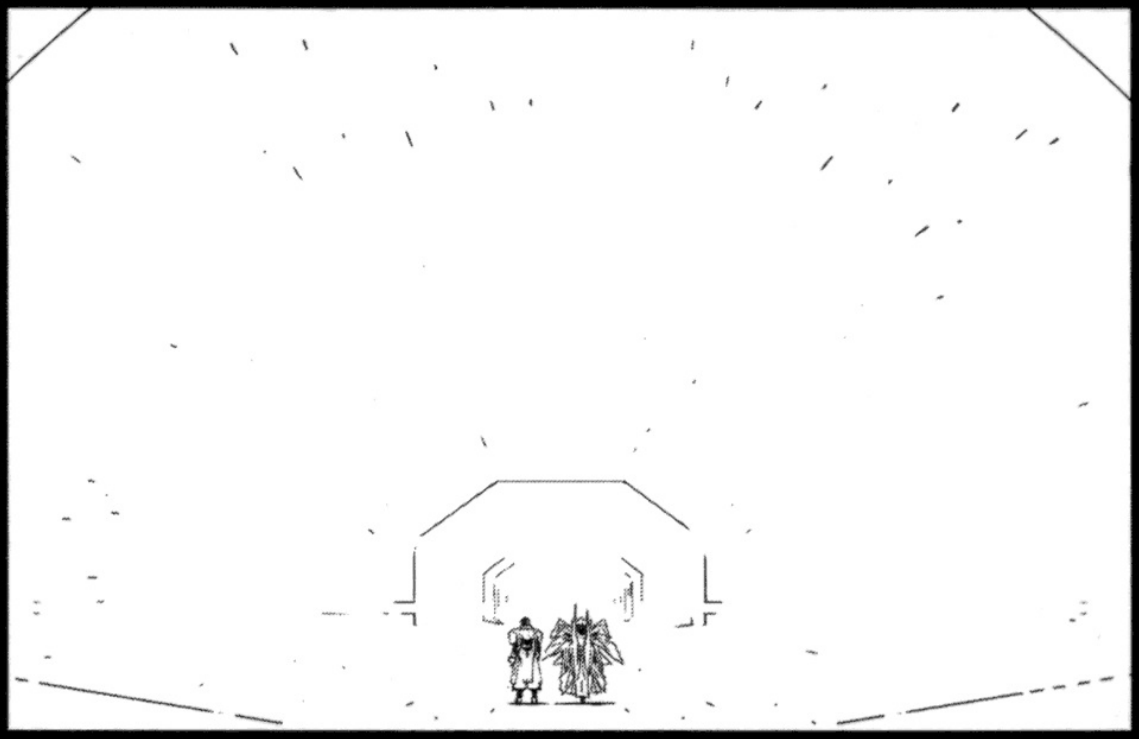
He spread his wings to tell the girl on the surface that he was okay and to see off the girl rising into the heavens.

He spread his great wings to say that he was here.

And then he lost consciousness.

Chapter 8

“Confirmation of Determination”



The place for determination
Is known as a decisive battlefield

●

Sayama had entered a white cave.

“Now, should I call this the interior of Noah or the interior of Babel?”

The vast cave continued for as far as he could see.

It was dimly lit, so his view ahead was limited, but the ceiling and walls seemed to all be over one hundred meters away.

He then looked back over his shoulder.

“The entrance, hm?”

The entrance he had come through was a hole located on the floor.

This space was oriented vertically when viewed from the ground.

However, Noah was an ark, so it was naturally tilted at ninety degrees when standing vertically from the ground.

Gravitational control was allowing him to stand on what would be the wall from the ground’s perspective.

…But this was originally the floor.

Its size could be explained if it had been a transport passageway along the exterior wall.

He could see a few hatches and holes along what were walls when viewed from the white floor.

“Now, then.”

Sayama faced forward, toward Noah’s bow.

A single white light was visible there.

It was a white automaton with twelve wings and she had said her name was Noah.

She resembled Shinjou…no, Shinjou Yukio and she turned back toward him.

“Sayama-sama, this way. Only sixteen more minutes. Over.”

Hearing that, Sayama recalled the dream of the past in which he had seen Noah.

This was likely the automaton his parents had seen with Shinjou’s parents at the top and center of this ship.

The three of them had to have been in the control room for the concept creation facility.

In that case, his destination was up ahead.

He breathed in and then asked Noah something.

“Were you here when Top-Gear was destroyed?”

“Testament,” replied Noah, using the response that Shinjou Yukio had likely brought to that world. “Beyond the infinite past, on the December 25, 1995 of approximately sixteen billion years ago, the one said to be your father visited and my creator left with him. Over.”

“They left you behind?”

“I was given a job to complete. And…”

And…

“As I fell into a location I determined to be a void, I entered a permanent sleep mode. But based on the memories of my terminal consciousness, Low-Gear was created, people were born, and – while I did not understand how it was possible until thirty-seven hours ago – someone identical to your father entered me about ninety years ago. Over.”

Who was that father of his?

Sayama exhaled as if relaxing his lungs.

“Professor Kinugasa, you mean? …But you understand what that was now, don’t you? You understand why the same people from approximately sixteen billion years ago are here now and why my father and your creator came here over twenty years ago.”

“Testament. Twenty-three hours ago, a theory arrived concerning that question and I checked back over the memories of my terminal consciousness in units reaching 102 digits, but I have determined it is all the truth. Over.”

Noah faced forward.

“I will show you the way. I hope you will not be late. Over.”

“Yes.”

Sayama took the first step through the great white cave as he followed Noah.

But then…

“So you have come, Sayama.”

A voice reached him from the passageway’s sky.

It was Mikoku’s voice. The voice contained a hint of exhaustion and its intonation shook a bit, but Sayama nodded in response.

So she is watching, he thought.

“Does the master of the house not even provide tea for her guests?”

“The master was long since destroyed. I am simply borrowing the place. And you have a guide, don’t you?”

He noticed a small bitter smile in her voice, so he formed a similar smile.

Is this smile nothing but a bluff? he asked himself.

“I am on my way there.”

“I will not be serving tea,” she said. “But I will turn on the lights. …Noah.”

“Testament.”

After Noah’s one-word response, there was light.

Bluish-white lines of light appeared on the cave’s floor, walls, and ceiling.

The great space was illuminated.

The bluish light was calm and quiet, but there was obvious shadow remaining on the passageway.

“Follow the path of this light. And after you reach the end, take the right-…”

Mikoku briefly trailed off.

“Which way are you facing now? If you are facing up, then, um, you would need to turn toward your chopsticks-holding hand, and…”

“Just to be clear, I am left-handed. And in this situation, which way would ‘up’ be?”

“W-wait, stop confusing me. Um, let’s see. I am right handed, so…”

Noah tilted her head.

“Mikoku-sama, you can solve this problem by leaving it to me. Over.”

“No, I should really do this myself. Um…”

“This is a recent discovery, but you are actually an idiot, aren’t you?” cut in Sayama.

“Look in a mirror when you say that!”

They both fell silent after that and then they both smiled.

“If I looked in a mirror inside Babel, I would probably see you in it,” said Sayama.

“Noah is not that harsh.”

After a three second pause, Mikoku continued.

“Continue straight ahead, and turn right when the lights go out. You will find an elevator there.”

“And I take that up?”

“At the top, you will find hangar doors that lead to…”

He heard her voice.

“Georgius’s foundry.”

Sayama was dumbfounded.

Instead of speaking, he held the right Georgius to his chest.

His aching ears heard more.

“Pass through there, follow the single passageway to the end, and you will reach me.”

“Quite the direct path.”

“There used to be a lot more here.”

That was all Mikoku said concerning her inner state.

“Hurry. The positive Concept Cores have already been placed within the facility. The negative concepts are activating and – as you can see – Noah is waiting to activate. You only have about fifteen minutes.”

“Will you wait to create your philosopher’s stone until I am there?”

“No,” she replied. “Noah was overjoyed by my visit and she is already preparing everything. …After all, it seems I was the last thing my parents registered with her. She was set to recognize my voice and follow any of my orders after entering standby mode in response to the activation of the negative concepts.”

The winged maid nodded in response.

“I was unable to predict that I would be able to meet you again after a nearly infinite amount of time. Over.”

“I see,” said Sayama as he began to run down the great passageway lit by blue light.

He could hear his running footsteps echoing in the distance and he sped up as if to erase that echo.

“Wait for me.”

He pursued the white wings, exhaled white breaths, and literally “ran up” the tower.

“I will reach you very soon.”

●

Fluorescent lights illuminated the walls of a small lobby.

The lobby contained a red telephone, a deactivated television, and a sofa.

This lobby was on the second story of a hospital, near the nurse station.

Visiting hours were nearly over and very few people passed through the lobby, but there was one person there.

A woman in a gown sat in a chair in front of the red telephone.

The nametag on the gown’s chest said Harakawa Yui and she held the phone’s receiver.

She smiled as she spoke into it.

“Oh, dear. Roger-kun, I see you’ve earned enough promotions to be stuck in this troublesome position. It must be tough not being able to head out onto the battlefield yourself. It serves you right.”

“Your own son is on that battlefield,” noted the voice coming from the receiver.

“And he’s responsible enough to take care of everything on his own. Plus he has Heo-san with him, doesn’t he?”

“Testament,” replied Roger. After a pause, he continued. “Is that how I should respond, Mrs. Harakawa?”

“You can use ‘miss’ if you want, Roger-kun.” Yui narrowed her eyes. “I hear something big is about to happen to the world.”

“You still get right to the point, I see.”

“That man liked to keep things frank. So does his son and so does Heo-san. … Don’t you think it’s wonderful? Everyone’s so open about everything that there’s no need to observe what’s going on in their home.”

“I am having trouble figuring out how that is ‘wonderful’,” said Roger. “And I only called to keep you updated, but I’m glad to see you’re as unreasonably calm as ever.”

“How rude. Especially when you’re as modest as ever despite your promotion.”

“That’s only because all of you naturally end up looking down on people!!”

“Maybe so,” she said.

She smiled bitterly at the sigh she heard from the other end of the call.

“C’mon,” she said. “How about you settle down a little? I know some nice nurses I could introduce you to.”

“For example?”

“Would you prefer a girl who loves pink bowels or one who enjoys giving injections a little too much?”

“You really haven’t changed! And knowing you, you’re probably serious!”

“Of course I am. I’m trying to solve your problems, so I can’t just make something up.”

Roger fell silent, so Yui continued.

“Another one wants to start a blood drawing exchange diary?”

“Can we get back on topic?”

Roger sounded exhausted, so Yui quietly apologized.

He then cleared his throat.

“Well, if something happens with the battle, I will contact you again.”

“Yes, yes,” she replied. “But I might not be here next time you call.”

“Where will you be?”

“Well,” she said.

That was when the phone rang.

The red telephone she was already using produced a noise.

It must have reached the man over the phone because she heard him gasp.

“It seems you have a visitor. Who could be visiting a lady at this hour?”

“Don’t you know? It’s always a witch that visits a girl at night,” said Yui. “I’m about to leave for the castle.”

“Do you have your glass slippers?”

“My normal ones will do just fine.”

With that, she set down the receiver.

The phone was still ringing and she was afraid of disturbing anyone else in the hospital, so she picked up the receiver again and brought it to her ear.

“What is it?” she asked.

A quiet female voice with a slight tremor answered her.

“I am right behind you.”

“Then why call on the phone?”

“That’s a good point.”

After hearing that, Yui turned around.

At some point, a woman in a black suit had appeared there.

The woman had written “telephone” on a paper cup and held it next to her mouth.

“Diana, at least make enough noise as you walk so that I can hear-…”

Yui trailed off when she saw Diana’s eyebrows lying flat.

“Is Yukio’s child doing that badly?”

“…Testament.” Diana lowered her shoulders. “She was hit by an attack with the name ‘Mikoku’ under the effects of 2nd-Gear’s Concept Core.”

“You don’t have to explain. You don’t.”

Yui stood up and brushed a hand through her hair.

“I can’t believe this… Diana, answer me honestly. Do you want to save her?”

“Well…”

The witch shrank down but said nothing more.

Yui nodded as Diana simply stared at her.

“You’re so afraid of not being able to save her that you don’t want to save

her?”

After a few seconds, Diana slowly closed her eyes.

“But at Osaka back then…”

“What about it?” Yui smiled bitterly. “I’m not going to say that those of us in the western unit wanted you to help us withdraw after you completed the eastern pillar of the barrier.”

“But…”

“You think you could have saved me from my illness, those who died afterwards, or those who are suffering like I am, don’t you?”

Diana nodded like a scolded child.

“I wanted to save all of you…”

“But you couldn’t move, could you?”

Diana looked up in surprise with tears in the corners of her eyes, but Yui went out of her way to show her a smile.

“If you couldn’t move, then there’s nothing you could have done.”

“B-but I…” The witch brought a hand to her forehead. “If I had been more determined back then, I might have been able to save Alberto, James, and Hiba.”

“Or you might have gotten yourself killed along with them.”

Yui spoke to Diana who was half in tears.

“That’s just how it is, Diana.” She took a breath. “Your broom was broken and you didn’t have anything to use in its place. The witch couldn’t fly, even if she had power. You think you might have been able to save them, but if you ask me, you would have been going off to your death.”

Yui stuck out her tongue.

“And I should really apologize. To be honest, I remember saying some awful things to you after that battle. And not even the negative concepts can erase that.”

She looked to Diana and Diana quickly lowered her head.

The witch had a hand over her eyes, tears spilled from below it, and her shoulders shook silently.

Yui took a step forward and gave a deep, bitter smile.

“That’s just how it is. I’m sorry it took me this long.”

As soon as she said that, Diana casually looked back up.

She turned her hand around to show a paper with “tears” written on it and smiled.

“Those were fake tears.”

“You haven’t changed at all!”

Diana laughed, straightened up, and nonchalantly looked up at the ceiling.

“You apologized just now, didn’t you?”

“…It’s possible.”

Diana smiled.

“That really hit me hard back then and I never really resolved any of it, but

since you apologized first, I guess I will apologize too.”

She nodded.

“Sorry for not being powerful enough.”

“So do you think you could have saved them?”

“A German witch is as powerful as she is confident.”

Diana smiled and Yui saw something transparent in the corners of her eyes, so Yui patted her on the shoulder.

“So you did cry.”

“I-I did not. It was an act! All an act!”

“Germans sure are bad at lying.”

“And the Japanese love to misinterpret things.”

Yui laughed off Diana’s blushing complaint, but then she held out her right hand.

“How about now? You may not be powerful enough, but you still have time, don’t you? In that case…”

Yui asked something of Diana who had briefly stopped moving.

“Do you wish to save her? Even if it might be hopeless?”

She held her hand out to the regretful witch.

“You might not be able to save her, but if you won’t fear that fact, then take this hand, Diana. If you will stop fearing your former regret and wish to save someone once more…”

She took a breath.

“Then I too will work to help one of the children who will inherit the present.”

●

#8 slowly but surely raised her speed on the battlefield.

As she moved her racing legs, she lifted her two machineguns.

The enemy rushed in ahead of her. That enemy was hundreds of dolls.

That was enough to call a horde.

But she did not care.

She swung the raised weapons like wings.

“Here I come!”

She squeezed the triggers with her fingers.

A series of gunshots immediately began to sound and the staccato noise, that resembled beating on paper, shot sparks into the night sky.

The vibration and sound sent out bullets at a pace of more than eight hundred a minute.

She controlled them and focused all of her functionality on her fingertips.

She pictured a great number of threads attached to each of her fingers.

“————!”

She controlled all of the flying bullets.

The ammunition belts ran out and the machineguns’ loading coils had nothing to load.

But she did not mind.

Her focus was on the bullets scattered throughout the air.

As if flapping her “wings”, she threw aside the machineguns and spread her fingers.

“Send these supersonic bullets to everywhere they might go.”

She gathered strength in the arms she had closed while “flapping”.

“There are no blind spots in the three hundred sixty degrees over which I serve!!”

The speeding bullets immediately struck all of her enemies.

They collided with the dolls’ necks, shoulders, arms, stomachs, waists, and ankles.

She heard the sound of penetration and snapping wires.

Those same sounds overlapped countless times and filled the air as a single ensemble.

Not one of the dolls was not pierced and thus absent from the song.

The dolls in the field had their bodies broken in places.

As they collapsed limply to the ground, new ones arrived from behind.

However, some space had opened up, so #8 ran.

She ran through the now unobstructed field to reach the large automaton.

That was her true target.

…If I do not defeat this, I have determined they will take control of this place!

She could deal with the normal dolls somehow or another.

By taking their equipment, she could fight them up to her limit.

But the large doll was different because she could not destroy it with the dolls’ equipment.

And if she was to do so with her own equipment…

…It has to be when it is still careless and not interfering!

That meant the initial attack.

She had to make this first attack count because the large doll was still carelessly assuming a single automaton could not do anything to it.

Her weapon was a hardened combat knife and she had a single target in mind.

…The shoulder wire cylinder!!

Such a large doll would be quite heavy and the shift in balance from damage to one arm would require some adjustment. This would not completely take the large doll out of the fight, but incapacitating one of the arms it used to wield its weapons would mean a lot.

Normally, she would have gone for the knees or ankles, but it had defensive armor there.

The shoulders however had a clear gap for when it opened the armpits, so she would attack there.

The problem was the fifteen centimeter diameter of the wire that acted as the giant doll’s tendon.

…How can I cut through that with this knife?

She knew a way. There was only one way for an automaton born in 3rd.

She could create high gravity near the tip of the knife blade and then give her attack extreme acceleration.

As long as she cut a notch, the wire's own tension would do the rest.

"This will work."

She calculated it out.

She had controlled hundreds of bullets a moment ago, so she only had to focus that power on a single point.

"I have determined this will work!!"

The large doll took a step toward her.

It was a step of interception. It had frantically taken the step after noticing her movement, but it was too late.

#8 only had to use its outstretched leg as a foothold and jump up to its right shoulder.

She briefly created a band of repelling gravity behind herself.

"!!"

And she accelerated.

She was headed toward the top of the large doll's foot. That metal stepping stone was two meters long.

She performed a flip and used her right hand to pull a knife from below her apron.

She held down her skirt and apron with her left hand, bent her knees a little, and landed on her enemy's foot.

At the same time, she kicked off the foot.

She made the kick much like a step and kept herself curled up like a cat.

She jumped straight up to approximately eight meters in the air.

She then rotated around and prepared the knife.

Her right palm wrapped around the bottom of the hilt and turned the blade straight toward the large doll's shoulder wire cylinder.

"————!!"

A moment later, #8 realized the she had lost the right half of her body.

●

"…Eh?"

It was not that she could not determine what had happened.

She simply could not react. Her senses of sight and touch determined what had damaged her and from which direction.

A giant wooden arrow had smashed her body.

It might as well have been an entire log and it had been fired by what seemed to stand up from the forest to the right.

…A second large doll!?

This was a new enemy and she had not been able to anticipate its presence.

After abandoning its bow, the large doll slowly crossed the forest and approached #8.

A flood of new dolls appeared from the forest at its feet.

This second large doll appeared in the field like the lord of those dolls.

By the time she realized it looked so large because she was looking up at it, #8 crashed into the ground.

"…!"

She felt no pain. There was only static.

She had lost everything from her right collarbone to her right hip.

A lot of her internal structure had been taken with those parts.

There was fortunately no damage to her head, but the center of her body had entered independent control mode for self-preservation in order to prevent any interference from the missing parts.

Her parts locked down their bypasses and balanced themselves.

This brought a sensation much like having an invisible hand groping at her insides and stroking along her muscles.

"Khah…"

She twisted and stiffened her body.

"Ah…"

But then she realized the enemy was right in front of her.

There were two giant forms and countless ones her size.

With the two large dolls looking down at her, she bit her lower lip.

"…" She grabbed the one remaining shoulder strap of her apron and pulled it down.

She was covering her broken and exposed parts.

Only after twisting her body and raising her knees to hide her body did she face her enemy again.

This prevented her from resisting any further, but…

…I never let even Sayama-sama see that.

She stared straight at her enemy with her raised body.

What was she to do now?

Her experience told her.

She knew exactly what a member of Team Leviathan would do, so she changed her expression and spoke.

"This is an expression of confidence."

She formed what she thought was a powerful smile.

"How well would you say I reproduced it?"

She only received a single response.

Both large dolls raised both their sashimi knives.

No, reflexively thought #8 when she saw them prepare to swing the blades down at her.

…With a knife, you are supposed to cut with a pulling motion!!

They should have moved it past her and pulled the blade back across her, and

yet…

“How inept!!”

As soon as she shouted that, the inept two were sliced apart.

●

…Eh?

The first thing #8 sensed came from her hearing devices.

She heard the sounds of splitting metal and snapping metal wires.

She actually heard hundreds of those noises, but…

…It all sounds like one.

It was a lot like the sound of a fork dropped on the floor.

For just an instant, a ring of white water vapor surrounded the torsos and waists of the large dolls overhead.

“!!”

Both of them burst from within at the same moment.

“Wh-…”

Just as she was going to ask what was going on, #8 heard an odd sound.

She heard the odd new sound as she looked up at the large dolls bursting to pieces from an internal shockwave.

It was an awful singing voice performing an original children’s song not found in her memory.

“One niiiiight, when wallllking through the forrrrrrest, I stumbled on a porrrrrrrrrn graveyarrrrrrrd.”

The singer was on the mountain path to the field.

He was sitting on a motorcycle while randomly playing an accordion on pure intuition.

“Ken-channnn got all turned onnnn. It’s a treasure troooooove, he said. I’m taking it with meeeee, he said. Then caaaaame the class triallll.”

He then pulled on either side of the accordion until it ripped in two.

“Yeahhhhhhh!!”

All of the dolls in the field stared at him, wondering what in the world was going on.

But he paid them no heed and stuffed the torn accordion in a trash bag he had brought with him.

“Ahh, what a pain in the ass. Kashima won’t shut up about keeping the mountains clean.”

As he spoke, #8 sensed more presences around her.

Her hearing devices sensed sounds and her tactile devices sensed the movement of the air.

“You all…”

The ones she had urged to retreat had walked up behind her.

And that included the badly damaged ones inside the coolers.

They were all approaching with smiles on their faces.

“We called in reinforcements.”

“Reinforcements?”

More figures left the forest behind the young man who had sung the aggressive children’s song.

They were all dressed as maids, but…

“#8-sama!!”

She heard their voices.

“The forty-two of us who were resting with the train have arrived!!”

The maids then split apart, creating a path for an old man in a lab coat.

“#-#8-kun!! Are you oka-…”

He looked at her and then at the enemies between them.

After seeing the bows and arrows the dolls slowly prepared, he tilted his head a bit.

“Mind if I just leave now?”

Everyone ignored him.

The young man on the motorcycle then took the Cowling Sword leaning against the motorcycle and rested it on his shoulder.

He sighed and looked to #8.

“Well, you did pretty well for a doll.”

“Yes,” replied all of those around her while placing a blanket over her to hide her broken form. “#-#8-sama was forced to expose herself!”

“No, it wasn’t that bad…”

“It was!” insisted the others as they looked across the enemy and then to Atsuta. “Smash them all to pieces, Rapist-sama!”

“I am not a rapist!!”

The enemy took a defensive stance toward his shouting and new dolls appeared from the forest.

But Atsuta remained relaxed and whistled as he looked at them all.

He also looked at the automatons behind #8.

“Grab your fellow doll and get out of here.”

#8 could not help but raise her voice.

“A-Atsuta-sama! I must stay by Babel to protect Sayama-sama!”

“Shut up,” he said while stepping off the motorcycle.

After spitting out a light “keh”, he looked around his surroundings.

“You don’t have to go to the trouble. This’ll be over soon. Wait until I clean things up here. Then you can go sit in front of Babel and wait for that idiot to come out all you want.”

After hearing that, #8 began to shake.

A tremor ran through her.

However, it was not caused by her.

Something was shaking the air and the earth.

Her scans instantly located the source: the Cowling Sword.

“This thing’s still in testing. …I used it once just now, so I’ve still got four to

go.”

Atsuta raised the white Cowling Sword as he spoke.

“I’ll cut them all down with the remaining four!”

●

At the same time, a helicopter landed at Japanese UCAT.

Harakawa Yui stepped out of it wearing pajamas and a gown.

On her way to the operating room, she requested all of the defensive philosopher’s stones the development department had.

With a single order from Tsukuyomi, that request was granted.

But according to the report, Shinjou’s heartrate had already dropped below half of what it had started at, so she was in real danger even without worrying about the concept.

That was why Diana and the others were on the move.

They were preparing their various formations in the struggle against an entire world.

Chapter 9

“Deciding Factor of the Heart”

It is meant to make one prosperous
It carries out decline and excess
It advances one’s own time

●

A certain room was filled with motion.

It was a small white room, a series of six lights hung from the center of the ceiling, and a tall table was located below the lights.

It was an operating room.

A girl lay face down on the table and a blue cloth was placed over her body.

Her back had been opened earlier, but there were now charms on the skin.

The motion came from near the head of the table. Some doctors wearing spell-enhanced surgery scrubs were speaking with women who had paper saying “sterile” attached to their clothes.

“You mean 2nd-Gear’s concept power is trying to carve her life, right?” asked a woman in a black suit.

“Testament,” replied a doctor.

He then glanced over at the monitor showing the girl’s heartrate.

Her heartrate and blood pressure were gradually falling and gaps had opened between the audible tones.

“It’s a lot like a blade is being slowly inserted into her. If we could pull that blade out or repel it, we should be able to sew up what it has cut and heal her right away, but…”

He took a breath.

“She’s going to reach her limit in about ten minutes.”

A sound reached him from the side.

It was a solid sound.

It came from the girl’s left arm. She wore a bracelet of small stones on her wrist and one of them had suddenly broken.

Next to the girl, a woman in a gown and a nametag reading Harakawa Yui frowned and looked to the bracelet.

The stones making up the bracelet broke one by one, like popping popcorn.

“…This is bad.”

Yui pulled a new bracelet from her pocket and wrapped it around the girl’s wrist.

Even the thread of the old one snapped and the new one’s stones started breaking as well, but…

“This should buy some time. Diana! Where’s the 2nd-Gear representative?”

“I’m over here.”

At some point an elderly woman in a lab coat had appeared in one corner of the room.

Her gray hair was tied back behind her neck and she held a large bag under one arm.

“Unfortunately, there’s nothing we can do. Totsuka is 2nd-Gear itself, so it ranks higher than mere residents of the Gear. That means there’s nothing we can do to overturn an injury made directly by Totsuka.”

“Then give us your knowledge and equipment, Director Tsukuyomi. Just like your husband did.”

Yui instructed Tsukuyomi to lower the bag to the floor.

She opened it and pulled out its contents.

“You’re really spoiling me by bringing out all of the development department’s defensive philosopher’s stones.”

She used both hands to pull out what looked like a chain.

It was made of philosopher’s stones.

The blue stones had a thread running through the metal to form the chain.

Yui forcefully swung the philosopher’s stone thread because it was too long to pull all the way from the bag otherwise.

Undulating blue light shot through the air on the left and right.

As soon as the light from the ceiling reflected off the series of blue, Yui’s hands raced along the surface of the blue chain.

Each hand held the kind of fruit knife she had used in her hospital room.

It only took an instant for her to carve into all of the flying blue stones.

To others, it may have looked like she had only chipped pieces off, but…

“By cutting defensive philosopher’s stones, you can add directionality to their power. It’s just like a jewel reflecting the light inside itself.”

Tsukuyomi leaned back to look on in awe as Yui grabbed the end of the blue chain she had unleashed into the air.

With a sharp sound, she began to wrap the blue stones around the girl’s wrists.

She took the fingertips of those entirely unadorned white hands and almost seemed to bind the wrists with the stones, but…

“That was fast!”

Before Yui had finished speaking, the first of the blue stones had shattered.

The chain-reaction of destruction continued and the protective stones broke like fire traveling down a fuse.

In the place of a life, those signs of protection vanished.

Yui’s protection was consumed in an instant by the power named Mikoku.

●

Wind descended a giant bluish-white pit.

No, it was technically not wind and it was technically not descending.

A massive elevator was rising through the pit and pushing aside the air already there.

The freight elevator measured fifty meters on each side.

The vents on either side of the elevator and on the walls allowed the wind down or into the inner hull.

A deep rumbling of air could be heard and two figures stood above that rumbling.

One was the winged maid who stood in front of the elevator’s control console.

The other was a boy standing in the center.

That boy was Sayama.

He was looking at his cellphone in the bluish-white light.

The LCD screen contained the text of an email from Ooki and that text was only two words.

“It’s beginning.”

Shinjou’s conceptual treatment was beginning.

When Sibyl had contacted him, she had said Shinjou’s life would be carved in about ten more minutes.

The time limit on the philosopher’s stone creation was almost the exact same, but…

…It will be okay.

It will all be okay, he told himself. *Shinjou-kun is sure to reach her hand out to me again and I will win here and stop the philosopher’s stone creation.*

Other reports had helped cheer him up. Hiba and Mikage were together, as were Heo and Harakawa, and both pairs had defeated their opponent. Izumo and Kazami had also defeated Jord, so they were on their way here.

They were apparently rooting for him.

…Having them rooting for me makes my skin crawl, but…

With that thought, he looked down.

The surface of the elevator contained several crosshatch-like scratches.

…Is that from the cargo they were transporting or mechanical dragon claws?

He crouched down and touched them with Georgius.

When he did, he found the crosshatching was made of very sharp lines.

“No… This was caused by some kind of blade.”

That conclusion allowed him to make a guess.

…Did someone fight here?

Another thought reached him on top of that.

For a close-range battle inside Noah, an enemy would have had to make it inside.

An enemy.

Noah could be called the center of Top-Gear and only one enemy had made it inside.

That was why Sayama slowly brought his right hand to the left side of his chest.

…Did my father fight here?

With who? he asked, but he had a clear hint.

There had only been a single enemy.

In his dream of the past, he had seen Shinjou’s parents inside Noah.

“Then… Did Top-Gear’s Shinjou Yukio and my father confront each other here?”

A voice answered him.

“Testament.”

The voice was Noah’s, but it seemed to reach him from the entirety of the ship.

She simply spoke without turning toward him.

“That is correct. Over.”

After receiving that confirmation, Sayama noticed a single color on the elevator’s white surface.

By this point, it had become a light brown stain.

The stain was mostly below the railing and a few more drips created a trail.

…Back and on the right?

The elevator was still rising, so he could not tell where the trail of stains led.

However, he could tell that the trail along the railing grew steadier partway through.

It was almost like the person had been supported by someone.

…My father.

Sayama breathed to support the pain in his chest.

“Did my father defeat Shinjou-kun’s father…but supported him as he walked somewhere?”

At the same time, the surrounding scenery changed.

The walls became a giant diagonal metal latticework.

The latticework was a bulkhead door, it was covered in a transparent material, and he could see through to the other side.

As the surrounding floors flowed further and further down around him, their lights came on and something came into view.

Those somethings were all huge.

Several floors were combined as one, it was too large to see the far end, and it was filled with machinery.

…Gods of war and mechanical dragons?

Sayama could see far into the distance on that large square floor and it was packed full of white giants and white dragons.

Another floor was covered with something like large grandfather clocks and a humanoid object was contained in each and every one.

They were dolls.

“Is this…?”

“These are me, the mass-produced versions of those sleeping, and the subsequent versions. Over.”

He heard Noah’s voice.

“Overall, there are three types of automaton, three types of god of war, and three types of mechanical dragon. They have all been brought to standby in the concept space hangars contained within me. They were all created to save people and they can function automatically just like me. Over.”

“They can move?”

He gasped a bit as he asked and Noah answered immediately.

“If it is necessary and their master requests it, I have determined it is only natural they will respond accordingly. Over.”

“I see.”

Sayama placed his hands on the railing and looked in each direction again.

As he did, Baku stirred on his head after staying still all this time.

The past was coming.

And this incident from the past would be from within Noah.

●

Sayama’s vision observed his surroundings from the rising elevator.

He could see two people next to his rising vision.

One man sat leaning against the railing and the other stood next to him.

Sayama recognized both of them.

They were Sayama Asagi and Top-Gear’s Shinjou Yukio.

Yukio sat on the floor in suit pants and a vest.

The color red spilled from his mouth and his right hand was pressed against his gut.

“I guess some rushed training isn’t enough to accomplish anything,” he said.

Asagi stood next to him with both fists clenched.

He simply asked the sitting man a question.

“When did the negative concepts start affecting you?”

“Before I had realized it.”

Asagi asked another question to that white-breathed response.

“Have they affected her too?”

“Why do I have to answer you? You can ask her yourself.”

Yukio gave a small smile, but bitterness filled it and he looked up at Asagi.

“This is funny.”

“What is?”

“You’re a lot more sentimental than she said you were.”

He stood up as he spoke.

He grabbed the railing, deepened his bitter smile, and looked in the same direction as Asagi.

His sharp gaze turned to the god of war, mechanical dragon, and doll hangars flowing by around them.

“Do you know what these are?”

“Noah’s soldiers perhaps?”

“No, they’re actually the helpers for the new world.”

Yukio coughed some blood onto his hand and breathed in.

After a sigh, he lowered the fist clenched around the blood.

“When all of the Gears are brought together, each Gear will be given a job or post within the world’s police, rescue organization, or security force. But even if they have those positions, they won’t have the personnel needed to fill out the lower levels of the organizations. A lot of the Gears don’t have many, if any,

people, after all. So…”

“You would use these to replace the personnel or help normal people take part?”

“Yes. These machines have been given the benefits of every positive concept. They can evolve and they can heal. Also, there were suggestions that we use them to conquer Low-Gear.”

“Why didn’t you use them?”

“You don’t know?” asked Yukio. “These are for the new world. Top-Gear has its pride as the highest Gear, so we aren’t going to use these in a fight against Low-Gear, the lowest Gear.”

Yukio looked left, to the back of the elevator, and he laughed toward the floor.

“Of course, the world started to collapse before we could have used them anyway.”

“…Sorry.”

“I’m not the one you should say that to and it isn’t something to apologize for anyway.”

He turned his back on Asagi.

“We went ahead and mass-produced them even though they were only at the prototype stage, but the number of gods of war and mechanical dragons, both large and small, exceeds three thousand and the number of automatons based on the angel model exceeds ten thousand. …This is what Top-Gear has prepared. If your world can create concepts, then we decided to oppose you by enriching the world with our technological prowess.”

As he spoke, he began to walk.

He was unsteady on his feet, so Asagi supported him from the left.

The two of them walked to the back of the rising elevator.

“Lead me to her,” said Asagi.

However, Yukio shook his head.

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because there is something I must do, Sayama Asagi.”

“Something you must do?”

Yukio looked to the other man’s face and gave a quick nod.

“I must surpass you, Sayama Asagi.”

Asagi frowned at that.

At the same time, the elevator’s speed began to drop.

Weak footsteps could be heard on the elevator that slowed its ascent as it reached the top.

Yukio let out a white breath.

“Yukio is trying to suppress the negative concepts so they won’t destroy your world. She’s fighting to the last second. And you have come here to seal Noah away so the after effects won’t destroy Low-Gear.”

“Then what will you do?”

“I will protect the future by doing something you couldn’t.”

The elevator came to a stop.

A bulkhead that looked like a giant wall rose in front of them and the floor beyond came into view.

“This is the top floor. It contains the concepts and anything related.”

A small hangar for cargo awaiting transport could be seen.

It was probably meant for carrying in the Concept Cores.

The left led to the bridge and the right led to a bulkhead door half the size of the wall.

As soon as the elevator carrying Yukio came to a stop, the sternward door began to move.

It opened.

It rose to show what lay beyond.

The first thing that came into view was a space illuminated by bluish-white lights.

The large room contained a single hatch on the floor and a white machine in the back that resembled an injection molding machine.

When they saw it, the two men’s reactions were polar opposites.

Yukio smiled and Asagi’s eyebrows twisted in surprise.

“This is…Georgius’s foundry, isn’t it!?”

“It is,” confirmed Yukio. “I created it myself.”

The two of them arrived at the edge of the elevator and Yukio released Asagi’s supporting arm from his trembling body.

He looked back with sweat on his brow.

“Georgius has yet to be made because one condition was lacking: a single human is needed to create it. But,” he began. “I will present a left and right Georgius to you now, victor. Please take it.”

Those words had a single meaning, so Asagi gave a shout. He grabbed Yukio’s shoulder and turned the man around.

“What about her!?”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

Yukio’s eyebrows rose and he knocked back Asagi’s hand.

He then looked the other man in the eye.

“I will defeat you.”

But after those words, his expression changed. He gave a gentle and relaxed smile.

“Yukio will become a bell to provide the ring of salvation to the world that was. You will become the protector of the world to come. In that case, I will become the spear to stop the sins of the dragons that are sure to occur in the world to come.”

He took a breath.

“Take care of Sadagiri. And…”

After another white breath, he continued.

“I’m glad I met you. I didn’t want to…but I’m glad I did.”

He turned his back, began to walk, and exhaled.

“Remember one thing. Make sure you remember one thing. The surname Shinjou will always be thinking of the surname Sayama. If you can remember that…”

His feet took him toward Georgius’s foundry.

He was unsteady on those feet, but he moved straight toward the machine.

“Then the will of Shinjou shall be with Sayama for all eternity.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Sayama was thrown from the past.

He awoke in an instant.

That was the same instant in which the elevator came to a gentle stop and a large empty space appeared before him.

“Georgius’s foundry…”

●

After stepping from the elevator, Sayama saw the standby area for cargo that was a little wider than the elevator.

He looked in the same direction Top-Gear’s Shinjou Yukio had walked in the past: toward the stern.

There was indeed an open bulkhead there, but….

“It was destroyed?”

Georgius’s foundry had burst apart like a blooming flower.

In that small space, the injection molding machine next to the hatch had been broken from within.

The fragments had scattered everywhere, but a pallet sat on the floor as if to carry something.

The pallet was the perfect size to hold two aluminum cases.

Sayama viewed the wreckage and suddenly clenched both fists.

He knew what had been obtained here in the past.

“What I hold in my hands.”

How troublesome, he thought.

“Testament,” replied Noah. “According to my records, a ceremony was performed here. An industrial ceremony replaced blood with steel, thoughts with mineral, and a body with a pair of weapons. A human body and a human life were used to create Georgius. Over.”

Sayama looked down at his hands.

He looked at the gauntlets he wore, the twin Georgiuses, and he hung his head.

“So my father-in-law died here…”

He waited a few moments.

“You have no retort for that perfect setup?”

“I apologize. I am not used to this sort of thing. Over.”

“What are you two talking about?” asked Mikoku’s voice from the ceiling.

“Hurry up. You are running out of time.”

Sayama checked his watch and found there were less than ten minutes until the startup time Mikoku had given.

The time limit for Shinjou’s life would have dipped below ten minutes as well.

“A battle over the world and a battle over Shinjou-kun’s life running at the same time. …I really cannot believe this.”

He sighed.

After releasing that white breath, he brought chilly air into his lungs as if to fight it.

At the same time, Mikoku asked him a question.

“Are you coming?”

“I said I was.”

Once he said that, he realized both Georgiuses were emitting a faint light.

…Are they reacting to the Concept Cores?

The positive Georgius on the left emitted a bluish-white light.

The negative Georgius on the right emitted a reddish-black light.

The light was stronger than before, so he frowned.

“Does this mean the time is approaching?”

“Testament. You should get going, Sayama-sama. Over.”

Noah moved to the side of the passageway and bowed.

“I am forbidden from interfering in your battle with Mikoku-sama. Please enjoy yourself as much as possible. Over.”

Hearing that, Sayama reached into his pocket and pulled out the silver watch his grandfather had left him.

He double-checked the time using the memento and found he had only a little over nine minutes until the conclusion for the world and for Shinjou.

After checking his remaining time, he began to run.

●

The sound of breaking stones filled the surgery room again and again.

That was the sound of “Mikoku” consuming defensive power instead of a life.

It was moving quickly.

The defensive power was too slow and too little, so Shinjou’s life would be carved before long.

However, Yui did not give up.

“Director Tsukuyomi, bring over every last philosopher’s stone I asked for. And Diana?”

“Wh-what is it?”

“I want you to think about this,” said Yui. “My philosopher’s stones can only buy us some time. We need a more fundamental solution here. …You need to find that, Diana.”

Two sounds of shattering stones rang out.

It was picking up speed each time and the doctor checking the heartrate

monitor spoke up.

“It’s started affecting her again! At this rate…”

His voice seemed to fall amid everyone’s silence.

“She won’t last another seven minutes.”

The nurses hurried to the power source in one corner of the room to prepare the electronic oscillation device.

Yui spoke through their quiet but defiant movement.

“The name Mikoku is breaking the defensive power more and more quickly, as if it’s growing immune. My techniques won’t work forever, so…”

She looked to Diana’s pale face.

The woman was trembling slightly, but Yui forced a smile.

“Please, Diana. This is the child Yukio left us, so think of a way to save her. … Please, greatest German witch.”

“B-but…”

Diana hesitated and Yui opened her mouth to say something more.

“——!”

But she coughed up blood instead.

Everyone gasped as Yui collapsed weakly to her knees.

The one who rushed over to her was Diana.

After Yui’s hips fell straight down, she collapsed forward.

Diana tried to grab her shoulder to stop that, but…

“No.”

Yui brushed aside Diana’s slender hand.

Yui did not fall. She placed her hand on the floor, so she leaned forward without falling.

“You have something to do, don’t you?”

Yui coughed up more blood as she spoke.

Having one’s organs fall to the negative side was no different from having a portion of their body die.

Yui moved her hands while hiding all of the pain, suffering, and squeezing inside herself.

She pulled a chain of blue stones from the bag Tsukuyomi had brought over.

“Diana, this isn’t like the past, so you can save her. You can save her with your power.”

A bitter laugh followed. It was Yui’s usual bitter laugh, even if it was a little bloody.

“Besides, you aren’t the only one who regretted not saving them.”

“…Eh?”

As Diana held her hand out, she heard Yui’s voice with the electronic tones of a heartrate in the background.

Yui’s shoulders shook.

“The rest of us also thought we had failed to save anyone. And yet…”

A laugh escaped her lips.

“Did you hear what those children said? They said the present world only exists thanks to what we did. They said we saved the present in that battle.”

“———”

“And…and that is why I will save this girl’s future. What about you, Diana?”

Diana fell silent for a moment, but when the electronic tone of a heartbeat sounded again, she began to move.

She pulled back the hand extended toward Yui.

The witch slowly moved back.

She silently stepped back enough to see both the operating table and the entire operating room and she stuck both hands into her hair.

“You do a terrible job of pretending to cry, Yui.”

Yui said nothing in response. She simply smiled toward the floor.

Diana also hung her head to hide her expression and hide her eyes behind her bangs.

“Activate spell.”

When she pulled her hands from her hair, pieces of white danced from the silver hair that waved around her.

It was paper. There were several hundred pieces and they instantly formed a circle in the air.

She created a multi-layer, multi-level dome of paper.

“Yui, you told me to think, but there is something I can do before that. After all, Germany is the armored nation of blood and iron. Not even you can outdo me when it comes to defensive techniques.”

The witch looked up with strength in her gaze.

“The enemy is a deadly attack from 2nd-Gear’s Concept Core. Defying the power which created an entire world may sound ridiculous, but…”

The witch raised both hands.

“One of the Five Great Peaks should be able to reach the same level as the Eight Great Dragon Kings who once destroyed entire worlds! I will now use that power to suppress a world!”

The paper fixed in midair bent on its own in accordance with the movements of her raised arms.

The paper folded in the middle and the folds created a single Japanese character.

She read that character aloud.

“Life!”

But light appeared at the same moment.

It was fire.

Even the floating defenses of life burned as if to take away that paper life as well.

However, Diana did not give up. She tossed out new paper and opened her mouth.

“I will save her!”

A single tear fell from her eye to the floor.
“This time, I will do it!!”

Chapter 10

“Where the Wind Judges”

People are an animal that looks up to the sky
So that providence might infinitely fill the space beyond

●

A pair of eyes looked outside from an elevated place.

They looked out from near the center of a tall tower rising into the sky.

The transparent wall there was far higher than the mountain range below.

The inner side of that wall was a floor and a girl stood perpendicular to that surface.

She wore a black armored uniform and she was facing left, toward the ground.

Small flashes of light were visible on the earth, in the forests, among the mountains, and atop the hills.

They were sparks.

This view of the flames of war could only be seen from an overhead vantage point.

After a single nod, the girl stopped watching and closed her eyes a little.

“So the conclusion is still ongoing.”

She turned around to face a single facility wrapped in bluish-white light.

It was a church.

The window she stood by was at the back of the church. The window brought in light next to the extractor that resembled a pulpit.

An open aisle led away from the front of the pulpit and something rose up from the ground along the left and right like rows of pews.

They were actually cylindrical storage pallets forty meters long each.

There were ten on either side and, to preserve space, they were angled to form a V-shape with the aisle in the center.

The ten on the left contained a red Gear mark and the ten on the right contained a blue Gear mark.

There was stained glass above the storage pallets.

There were ten windows full of it.

They began with the creation of the world, told of the tower of words, and praised the birth of the holy one.

Starting from the entrance, nine of the stained glass windows were glowing.

A few smaller panes of colored glass were positioned between the main windows, but only three of them were yet to be lit.

The light was approaching the stepped floor and the pulpit.

A white bell was located at the ceiling above the pulpit and a girl lay below the pulpit.

“Shino,” said the girl by the window. “Not long until I bring you back to life.”

She took a step toward the other girl and another small pane of glass lit overhead, leaving only two.

“Not long…not long until I change the world!”

As soon as she said that, another voice filled the large church.

“That is something I cannot allow.”

The girl turned toward the voice.

Someone in a white armored uniform stood in the church entrance leading to a dark corridor.

It was a boy with a sharp look in his eyes.

She stared at him and spoke.

“So you are here, Sayama Mikoto.”

“Yes,” he replied. “I am, Toda Mikoku.”

Sayama breathed in before continuing.

“I am here to beat that willpower out of you.”

●

Sayama heard Mikoku break the church’s stillness with a quiet breath that was almost a laugh.

Her voice soon followed.

“The world will be changed in another three minutes. Top-Gear was unable to create a concept even after everything they did, but now that Noah is in Low-Gear, it takes only a single command. How ironic.”

“Are you creating a philosopher’s stone containing a resurrection concept?” asked Sayama.

The surrounding stained glass located high on the walls showed him the facility’s progress.

The only ones not lit were a single large window and two small panes.

A moment passed and one more small pane lit up.

At the same time, Sayama set the timer on his wristwatch to ring continuously just before reaching the one minute mark.

When he looked back up, he saw Mikoku looking up at the light.

“Three more minutes. …That is all the time left until the world grows so much richer.”

Sayama replied clearly to Mikoku’s expressionless words.

“It will not grow richer.”

“Why not?”

…You do not know?

“It will simply be a world with no rest. It will lose the slumber of death, after all.”

Mikoku’s expression changed slightly at that.

She frowned and looked back at him.

“Do you understand what it means to lose something?”

He did not answer her question.

He replied in a different way.

“If it were me, I would create a different concept. I would provide the world with something much more useful.”

“Namely?”

He announced the first word that came to mind.

“Eroundism.”

Mikoku froze in place.

That was indeed a shocking word, he thought when he saw her motionlessness.

…Yes, even I am feeling a little shaken by it.

I only said it on a whim, but that is actually an amazing idea.

The entire world would become Shinjou-kun.

But what would happen to me?

No, wait. Would that mean it would feel just like Shinjou-kun if I touched my own butt?

…Would it be a divine gift of self-sufficiency!?

I do not know. I cannot know what would happen to the world or myself until I tried it.

But if I was going to create concept, that would definitely be a worth a try.

He gulped, and…

“Move out of the way. It is my turn now.”

“Calm down!” shouted Mikoku as she stood in front of the extractor to block his way. “I have not finished my turn yet!”

“I see.”

Sayama nodded and started to think about what kind of concept he would need to create to turn the world into Shinjou.

“Then I will wait.”

“You are going to wait!?”

That question reminded him of something.

…Come to think of it…

He pulled out his cellphone and pressed a button.

“It is I.”

“Wh-what do you need right now, Sayama!? I’m a little busy!!”

The phone replied with Kazami’s voice as well as sounds of impact and cannon fire.

I suppose I should ask this, he thought ahead of his question.

“Are you fighting?”

“Of course I am! Do you want me to come kick your ass!? How about you just die!?”

“Ha ha ha. If I died, there would be no one left to stop the world from changing.”

She hung up on him, so he frowned and stared at the silent phone.

“That girl lives on nothing but excitement. Honestly, now.”

He placed the phone back in his pocket and turned his eyes toward Mikoku.

“Unfortunately, I cannot simply wait when the commoners are all fighting.”

“Are you sure?”

“Am I sure about what?”

Mikoku took a step away from the extractor and toward him.

Gentle footsteps sounded as she continued to walk.

“If you let me create my concept…you can take back Shinjou even if she does die.”

“Thank you for that meaningless offer based on our overlapping time limits.”

He stripped all emotion from his heart with a sigh as he spoke.

“I will beat you down.”

“Are you sure? When you get back, you are only going to learn that Shinjou has died.”

“Not to worry. If I win, she will be so moved that she is sure to come back to life.”

After clearing his emotions, he pounded a single element in their place.

He filled himself with a façade of strength.

…Yes, a show of strength is all that matters.

So he spoke.

“Not to worry. Not to worry in the slightest. After all…”

He continued.

“Shinjou-kun will be wonderful even as a corpse.”

“That is an insane thing to say.”

“And that is a far-too-normal rebuttal.”

He reached into his pocket as he answered her and pulled out some papers.

It was a collection of acceleration and defense charms.

“—————”

He took a defensive stance, stared at Mikoku as she approached, and breathed in.

In response, Mikoku stopped ten meters away.

Just like he had reached into his pocket, she reached both hands behind her back.

She pulled something from the mounts on the back of the armored uniform.

“I created these swords as practice for the concept creation.”

The two swords were fairly short with a blade length of about sixty centimeters.

The hilts were nothing more than cloth wrapped around the bottom of the blade.

However, there was something clearly different about these blades.

The right one was blue and the left one was red.

…Is that…?

Sayama frowned and Mikoku smiled with the twin swords in hand. Her eyebrows rose as she smiled.

“These are philosopher’s stone swords. They use exactly the concepts you can see here.”

She pointed left and right with the swords.

“Inferior copies of every positive concept and of every negative concept were packed into these swords.”

Sayama's frown deepened when he heard that.

…That is not good.

He raised the hand holding the charms.

"Do you intend to wield every world as you fight?"

"No. …You remember what we learned at the meeting, don't you? Top-Gear is the highest Gear but also a copy of every other Gear. So…"

She prepared the two swords.

"I will use copies to fight. That is all this is."

With those words, the two of them gave each other a nod of understanding.

"Sayama, allow me to state your condition for victory. …If my consciousness cuts out for even an instant, Noah will sense a possibility of the philosopher's stone extraction losing all meaning and she will cancel that command. As for my condition for victory…"

"You simply must defeat me."

That was all they said. They did not even name themselves to each other.

However, Sayama did open his mouth.

He said two simple words.

"Now, then."

Mikoku replied with a yell.

"En garde!!"

●

Sayama accelerated.

He activated a charm behind him to launch himself forward from the very first step.

…I will take the first strike!

He stayed low and tore in toward his opponent.

"!"

Then he leaped.

He jumped to Mikoku's right and immediately jumped back to the left.

His feint was too fast to follow and he definitely filled the gap between them.

A distance of ten meters was instantly reduced to zero and he landed down on his knees to her right.

He had reached her.

His landing whipped up the wind and sounded like stone being struck.

And his speed did not stop there.

He leaped again. He swung his left fist to throw a punch while leaping to the right.

…I will use my speed for this one!

His fist ripped through the wind and the air seemed to burst.

However, Mikoku reacted, but not by evading.

- **—The world is reversed for an instant.**

This was an inferior copy of a 7th-Gear concept. It was one of those included in Mikoku's sword.

She had activated it.

…!?

Their positions reversed, so Mikoku was swinging her left sword horizontally toward Sayama.

The tip of the red blade carried a trail of water vapor.

A moment later, Sayama jumped and performed a midair backflip in place.

Mikoku's red arc swept by below his rotating head.

By the time he landed, she had finished swinging her left arm and had her back to him.

So to pick up speed for a kick, he took a light step as he landed.

He made a counterattack against Mikoku's clockwise rotation.

For the left roundhouse kick, he spun quickly on his right toes.

The kicking foot was aimed at her left side.

Just as he thought it was going to hit, she took action.

- **—Objects fall down.**

The concept lowered Mikoku's stance with an instant of momentum.

She crouched down and avoided the attack.

Sayama's kick cut free a few of her hairs that did not fall quickly enough.

That was when she gathered strength in her right sword.

- **—There is no mutual understanding.**

A metallic sound rang out and Sayama found himself unable to understand the world.

He was in an entirely incomprehensible space.

In it, Mikoku swung up her left red sword toward him as he landed.

"…!"

The left slash sent a red arc his way.

It was directed toward his neck, but he could not understand that.

However, he did not hesitate.

…Even if I cannot see my opponent, I have something here I can believe in!

He gathered his thoughts and clenched them in his right fist.

He threw an uppercut wrapped in a bit of red light.

He twisted his body and snapped his right arm up from the waist, but he was not targeting Mikoku.

His hand simply flew toward empty air.

"Tear into it!"

Mikoku frowned when she heard him.

"Is he acting out of pure desperation?"

But she soon received an answer.

The world split apart.

“!”

The incomprehensible concept space was destroyed by Sayama’s Georgius.

After the sound of spraying water or shattering glass, the world reached him once more.

He saw Mikoku’s eyes widened in surprise as she swung down her sword.

“Is that… Is that Georgius’s power to destroy concepts!?”

He did not answer.

He did, however, pull his right uppercut back in front of his face and throw his left fist forward.

It was a straight left punch.

An activated charm gave his fist more force and his shoulder shot forward like a catapult.

He remained true to the fundamentals.

“!!”

The strike tore into the wind and hit her sword at the base.

A moment later, the sword broke with a solid sound.

He could hear the red blade shatter.

But then he saw something else.

The broken and scattering red sword began to regenerate.

The blade grew thicker and longer and Mikoku gave him a sharp look.

“The concepts of regeneration and evolution were copied as well!”

A metallic noise sounded loud as the blade fit back together.

The somewhat short red blade had evolved to a new form and the shimmering heat of reactivation burst from its entire length.

Its length, thickness, and sharpness were all worthy of the name “sword” now.

Mikoku sent the sword racing out. With a snap of her wrist, she swung it down from directly above.

Sayama caught it with his fist.

A reflexive sound of the hit shook his body and the air.

From there, the two of them began a series of attacks.

The noise never ceased.

“…!”

Mikoku sent out an unmatched number of red and blue arcs.

Sayama created countless straight lines with his red and blue fists.

They moved, changed position, and produced the reverberation or shattering of concepts as they fought.

At the top of the walls, the final small pane of stained glass filled with light.

That only left the one large stained glass window.

At the same time, a slight vibration enveloped them.

The church-like facility was moving.

Its movement carried it upwards.

“Noah is switching from defensive standby mode to normal cruising mode in

order to optimize the power bypass!”

That rumble of activation was absolute.

It grew to a loud tremor and filled the air like a song.

Their field of vision had begun to move.

The facility was to become the top of Noah.

Most likely, Noah was changing from a tower to an ark.

And all in preparation to change the world.

●

On the surface, the battlefield was centered on Babel.

The Top-Gear forces were in the forest and UCAT intercepted them from the field around Babel or the mountain path leading to Babel.

The battle had essentially reached a stalemate, but…

“————” The automatons were the first to notice the sound coming from the sky.

As they fought, they all suddenly looked up to the heavens.

“Ah…”

A moment later, #8 gave a shout from where she was wrapped in a blanket inside a cooler.

“Fall back! The sky is falling!!”

With those words, it came.

A sound that seemed both high- and low-pitched fell from the sky like a curtain.

But just as their confusion in that harmless sound allowed it to cover the ground, the entire surface of the ground struck them *from below.*

“!”

This was not an earthquake.

It was a single ripple.

Everything on the surface was unthinkably struck from the very ground they stood on.

The great blow launched everything and everyone into the air.

“…!!”

Some of them flew as high as five meters.

Among them, Kazami activated X-Wi in midair.

That was when she noticed something about the white tower seeming to defy the night before her eyes.

“It’s moving?”

Her question was answered in the affirmative.

The very next moment, everyone understood after being thrown to the ground.

The white tower in the center of their vision was slowly transforming and shaking.

The tremor of the tower passed through and shook the air.

Overhead, the tower's surface began to produce clouds.

Its surface armor changed position as the moving parts within changed form. The disturbance of the wind high in the sky created more and more new clouds that seemed intent on decorating Babel's surface.

Soon, Babel's shaking grew visible.

Everyone knew this was very bad.

That great aerial ship was over fifteen kilometers long and had a maximum diameter of two kilometers. If that suddenly tore itself from the earth, it would create a massive earthquake for kilometers around.

This was a thankfully uninhabited place, but the damage from the collapsing and splitting ground would affect them all equally.

So…

"Fall baaaaack!!" shouted Kazami.

However, it was too late.

The Tower of Babel sent a deafening pulsation into the sky.

As that tower of words used its light to indicate its approximately two minute time limit, everyone down below saw something.

The massive structure had crudely torn itself from the earth.

●

It was a casual action, much like uprooting some grass.

The ground was torn up and lifted like a sticky liquid, while the air was pushed away and became wind.

A heavy sound too gentle to call a roar swept across the earth and wind as everything was carried into the sky.

It was uprooted.

No, it was not uprooted. It was taking back its rightful form.

Directly below, the great white tower seemed to ignore all of the land in its search for its proper place.

Its great mass moved the air and sent a storm-like tremor of air in every direction.

"——————"

Its fifteen kilometer form smashed an equal mass of earth and flew into the sky.

It was an ark.

As it stood in the sky, it gently collapsed onto its side.

The air was compressed below its collapse and the pressure of the air crushed the trembling and breaking land even further below.

The trees and structures on the earth scattered as if blown by a powerful fan. The dirt simply sitting on the crust was torn up into the sky by the pressurized air and the earth was blown to the side in every direction.

The earth trembled in order to fill the hole left by the great mass leaving it.

The tremor created a chain reaction into the distance, a few areas collapsed,

and it all continued without end like the ringing of a tuning fork.

It was a great roar.

An attack of air came from the sky and the ground meant to support it would not stop trembling from below.

This created a liquefaction of the earth's surface.

The vibration from the sky and the crust caused the bonds of the surface structure to crumble on the macro level and it all slid down the crust like liquid.

Everything on the mountain slopes collapsed down to the bottom of the mountains.

Everything at the bottom of the valleys moved to the base of the mountains as an avalanche.

None of it ever seemed to stop.

Noah, the ark meant to save all Gears, started forward over the seeming flood of earth below it.

At an altitude of approximately eight thousand meters, the white aerial ship placed itself horizontally to secure its position in the night sky.

At the same time, the top of its central room opened.

The room was fifty meters in each direction, so it was only a speck compared to the entire ship.

Below a field of air protecting it from the winds of high altitude, the opened room took the form of a church.

That church contained twenty Concept Cores and a bell was contained in a small room above the pulpit.

Light resided in the bell.

There was a winged automaton there.

Her name was also Noah.

The winged automaton arrived next to the bell as if descending from the heavens.

The cord in her hand was to ring the bell, but she did not ring it yet.

It was not yet time.

The last of the stained glass windows on the left and right walls was still dark.

When she saw the incomplete light, Noah moved no further.

Her motionless seemed to say the light would fill all of the stained glass before long.

As if waiting for the answer, the ark named Noah sat in midair with the angel named Noah atop it.

Then a sound rang out.

At the top of the ark, something other than a ringing bell sounded from the church.

This was the tone of battle, of attack.

●

Kazami lost consciousness for just an instant.

She came to when her body was violently shaken and she heard a voice a moment later.

“Chisato! Chisato! Are you okay? Is it here? Hmm, maybe not. Then what about here?”

Something was groping her breasts and placing its ear against them from below, so she swung her fist while coming to.

She heard a solid impact and a group shrieking as they moved back.

…What is going on?

She opened her eyes and saw the sky to her left.

It was a black sky and she saw what she had hit flying through that sky.

It was a boy in a white armored uniform and it appeared to be Izumo.

She commented on him flying there.

“C’mon, Kaku. Why are you flying?”

A moment later, several voices gave a unified retort behind her.

“He isn’t flying! He was sent flying!!”

Eh? she thought as she turned back to find the sky and the others.

She saw the automatons and the UCAT members, including American UCAT.

“Huh?” She tilted her head. “Why are you all gathered together?”

“Behind you! Behind you!!”

She turned around as told and noticed Izumo growing more distant.

As she watched, he only flew further away.

“Eh?”

She only caught on once she saw the shadowy features of the earth several hundred meters below him.

“Why is he falling?”

That question of her sleepy mind was answered from below her feet.

She heard Heo’s voice from the blue and white armor there.

“Um…this is really, really hard to say, but…”

“Give it to me straight.”

“I-I’d hurt you if I did that.”

“Then give it to me cutely.”

After five seconds of thought, Heo answered that request.

“Kong♪Punch?”

“Are you mocking me!?”

“Look forward!!”

She did as the others told her and found Izumo had grown very distant indeed.

She saw him moving and forming letters with his body, so she narrowed her eyes to read them.

“Y…M…C…A?”

“N-no,” said Heo’s voice. “That’s H-E-L-P!”

She groggily muttered “help” under her breath and then it hit her.

“Then we have to help him!”

She finally woke from the daze of being knocked unconscious.

“He’s in trouble!!”

“Th-that’s what I was saying!” shouted Heo.

“No, you weren’t. You were enjoying this,” muttered the people behind Kazami.

Meanwhile, Heo moved her body, which meant Thunder Fellow.

Kazami saw Noah lit by moonlight above and the American UCAT mechanical dragons were packed in flying around at the same altitude as her.

She asked a question as Thunder Fellow descended toward Izumo.

“What’s going on!?”

“There’s too much turbulence in the air above to get close to Noah!” explained Heo. “And we have a minute and thirty-two seconds left.”

Harakawa’s voice spoke next.

“Once we pick up the president, we’ll let all of you off.”

“What will you two-…”

“We’ll stay in the air. If it comes to it, we’ll brave the turbulence no matter how reckless it is.”

Only the transparent air was visible overhead, but a closer look showed Noah flickering.

The air was swelling and in complete disarray.

Normally, the wind would scatter and disperse, but this was inside a massive concept space. The air moved by Noah reflected off the ground and remained in the sky.

“Thunder Fellow can manage it. Whether we’ll make it in time is another issue, though.”

“Even if you can’t, Sayama will do something.”

Hearing Kazami’s words, everyone on the descending back looked up into the sky.

They all thought about the boy fighting inside Noah in the heavens above.

But that was when Heo cut in.

“Kazami, you didn’t hear the call just now, did you?”

“Call?”

The others shrank down around her.

…Did something bad happen?

As she wondered that, Harakawa spoke up.

“Shinjou is in critical condition.”

“——————”

“My mom and the others are doing everything they can, but it seems the ‘Mikoku’ attack is really bad. Her heart has just about stopped, so…”

“Don’t say that!!”

She shouted back on reflex.

An awful thought was threatening to rise from the bottom of her heart, but she shook her head to get rid of it.

…That…

“It will be okay.”

She said it more to calm herself than the others.

She said it again and looked up into the sky.

Her gaze seemed to look straight through Noah and to the boy inside.

“Sayama is fighting…so there’s no way Shinjou will die!”

She received no response, but she clenched her fist.

“Isn’t that right?”

Just as she asked that, it turned out Thunder Fellow was focusing too much on his passengers as he descended.

“Ah.”

His nose ran into Izumo and knocked him further away.

●

Continuous sounds of bursting filled the room.

It was the sound of paper and stones exploding and turning to ash.

Wind blew from the table in the center of the small room. It came from the back of the girl lying there.

The wind was a great gust. It was the slightly damp wind of gathering clouds.

Paper flew around the girl.

Blue stones were wrapped around her arms.

Swords bearing the name of the primary god of life were stabbed into the four sides of the room, but…

“Her heartrate, blood pressure, and brainwaves are falling!”

The three women attempting to rule the room frowned at the doctor’s announcement.

The paper was instantly scattered as ash, the stones vanished as dust, and the swords cracked and shattered.

However, the wind of gathering clouds strengthened and the silver-haired witch raised her voice.

“The resistance of the 2nd-Gear concepts is growing stronger!”

She tossed paper from her fingers and a woman in a gown smiled while on her knees.

“That means it’s growing desperate, too. It’s trying to carve her life, but it’s meeting enough of a defense to grow desperate. And that means…it has a limit to its power. If it had no limit, it wouldn’t need to panic.”

Next to her, an elderly woman smiled bitterly with the wind whipping at her lab coat.

“Ahh, ahh. I’m part of the imperial family and here I am opposing the Concept Core’s power. If I get cursed for this…”

Her bitter smile deepened.

“It might make for a good story.”

The three women nodded.

A moment later, the wind suddenly calmed.

That lull continued for a few seconds and the women looked to the time counter on the EKG.

“One minute and twenty seconds left! Here it comes! The concept of the name Mikoku is going to crush any defense preventing it from carving this girl’s life!!”

As soon as the witch said that, *it* came.

It was no longer a wind.

It was pure power.

Diana and the others were all slammed against the wall.

Chapter 11

“What Matters in Life”

I will call for you

●

Power swept across the operating room in an instant.

The stirring of wind that gave form to the life-carving power rose from the operating table like shimmering heat or a great serpent.

“!”

Power was thrown against everything with more force than an explosion.

The power at the base of a world’s creation was sent out as pressure.

That pressure was directed at the defending power and its wielders.

The room itself did not shake or sway. The reverberating power only shook its target and those connected to it.

The paper thrown by the witch turned to ash before it could even burn.

The blue stones and the string connecting them broke and snapped before being slammed against the wall.

The swords an elderly woman in a lab coat had stabbed into the ground and the new ones she was preparing shattered in an instant.

The women themselves were slammed into the wall.

The doctors, the machinery, and everything else were as well.

Everything working to protect the form lying on the table was distanced in the name of that great wind.

“————!!”

The wind roared.

The wind whirled around the room and chose its direction.

It raised its head like a cobra and turned toward the white skin on the back of the girl on the table.

The life-carving power had knocked back all other power and there was nothing left to oppose it.

Shinjou’s will was also on the verge of breaking.

However, the women heard something.

Shinjou was nearly in a coma, but a voice was dragged out of her by the life-carving concept.

The name Mikoku drew out a name as a representation of the girl’s will.

“Sayama…-kun.”

Her vanishing will called a certain boy’s name and the three women heard it.

●

Sound rang through that space.

There were three sounds.

One was the clash of blade and fist.

Another was the racing wind.

The last was roaring voices.

The ceiling had opened to reveal the sky and eighteen large stained glass windows shined on the walls.

The final window on either side, which depicted the holy one's birth, was the only one unlit and the two figures moving below them were entirely focused on producing the aforementioned sounds.

The sounds reverberated into the sky.

Fist and sword whipped up the wind equally and sounded out as they collided.

Their rapid movements created a mist around them and the moonlight gave it all a pale hue.

The sounds rang and voices spoke.

"Well!?"

One of the moving figures, Mikoku, raised her voice.

"Shinjou's life is being carved away at this very moment!"

The wind roared as Sayama ducked below her racing blade.

It flew over his head and he threw a left smash toward her gut.

…Hit her!

That thought was followed by a straight right kick from Mikoku.

She had predicted his action.

In that instant, he spotted the word "below" written on the surface of her blue sword.

"Is that…?"

"It is Wanambi's prediction!"

Before she finished speaking, he guarded by forcibly bending the elbow of his left smash.

The bottom of her foot collided with the left side of his body.

"!"

He was sent flying.

The white mist surrounding them was blown away and he flew seven meters.

He landed and quickly got back up.

…!?

But Mikoku's next attack was already on the way.

The pressure of the sword tore into the mist like a solid blow.

Sayama managed to leap out of the way, but Mikoku immediately turned around.

"What is the matter!?"

She instantly circled behind him.

"What is the matter?"

Her question came from quite near the back of his neck.

"Concepts really are interesting. I am gradually figuring out how to use them. …And all of you have been fighting all this time with this power in your possession."

Her speed rose, so Sayama activated a charm to accelerate himself.

He jumped to the right and turned it into a feint by immediately switching to the left.

"It is no use. Those charms are based on 7th-Gear's bodily reinforcement

concepts and 1st-Gear's writing concepts. That means I have them as well."

Her voice was even closer than before.

"But do not worry. I will no longer attack you with 2nd-Gear's concept."

Her voice was calm.

"I feel bad about what happened to Shinjou. …I really do."

He reacted to that.

"Shinjou-kun is…"

…Not as weak as you think she is!!

He acted on reflex.

He threw a left backhand blow.

He sent out his elbow and instantly snapped the arm straight.

Rather than at eye level, he sent it up from below to take advantage of her blind spot.

However…

"I saw that coming."

The voice came from right in front of him as he turned around. He saw black hair flowing in the wind, and…

"So it ends here."

He heard a frowning voice.

Then Mikoku's blue sword thrust toward him in a straight line.

It was going to hit.

The thrusting strike sounded out as it reached the center of his chest.

"————!"

He was sent flying.

●

The color white filled Diana's vision.

The white was the ceiling.

The operating room's ceiling sat in front of her as the wind toyed with it.

She was collapsed on the ground, her hair was disheveled, and she felt nothing but wind and pressure.

…Ah.

When she moved her head to look around, she saw several other collapsed forms.

Yui, Tsukuyomi, the doctors, the machinery, and everything else had been knocked to the ground.

She was pressed against the wall by the wind and a few pieces of clothing were plastered to her.

They were likely the clothes removed from Shinjou before the surgery.

She peeled them away and started getting up.

Before, she had heard the voice of Shinjou's will calling a precious name and she wanted to respond to that call.

The wind had become a dragon swirling above the operating table in the

center of the room.

That wind power had raised its head as if preparing to devour Shinjou as she slept below it.

It would all be over soon, but…

…This time…

The life-carving power had shown itself now.

If she could place some powerful defensive power on Shinjou, the life-carving power that had resided inside her would lose its home and would vanish.

However…

“—————”

She had no more paper.

Yui’s stones had shattered and Tsukuyomi’s swords had broken.

“Kh,” she groaned while placing her hands on the floor to get up.

…Is it happening again?

Would she be unable to save someone again?

Would she use her lack of power as an excuse to herself?

The wind was so powerful that simply sitting up was all she could manage.

If she stood, the dense wind would slam her against the wall again.

But…

…I want to save her.

She clenched her teeth but lowered her gaze.

“Is there nothing I can do this time either?

Her lowered gaze spotted something on the floor.

“—————”

She shot forward as soon as she realized what it was.

She did everything she could to move forward, so she was practically falling on the floor as she crawled with her hair whipping in the wind.

She picked up the object and clenched it in her hand.

“—————!!”

This is it, she thought. *This will settle it.*

●

The mist split to either side and Sayama was knocked through it while falling back-first to the ground.

He flew eight meters and rolled another three meters after landing.

Baku had fallen from his head, so the creature enveloped himself in the mist to pursue his master.

Mikoku let out a white breath and watched the curtain of mist close once more.

She watched long enough to tell the mist was entirely motionless.

“—————”

Her shoulders drooped.

She lowered both swords and did not bother wiping the sweat from her brow.

“Honestly.” She hung her head as she spoke. “A minute and ten seconds left, is it?”

She weakly turned around and her gaze moved to the concept extractor and the girl lying below it.

Her eyebrows remained slightly lowered as she took a step through the mist.

“Shino…”

She closed her eyes and brought a hand to them while still holding the sword.

“It seems I laid my hand on Shinjou, too.”

She took in a scratchy breath.

“But…”

As soon as she said that, something interrupted.

“Do you think you can just bring her back to life, you fool?”

She quickly turned toward the voice behind her and immediately saw Sayama’s fist.

Something as hard as rock struck the right side of her face.

It was not so much the pain or the impact.

“…!?”

Her surprise was the strongest.

Her blue sword lit up and a healing concept from 10th-Gear activated as she flew through the air.

She recovered and landed with her right leg sliding a little.

She faced forward and saw someone in a white armored uniform.

It was Sayama.

She had definitely pierced his left chest before, and yet…

“You look like you are wondering how this is possible.” He did not wipe the sweat from his brow. “But I would like to ask that, too. How could you not tell what you had hit?”

His lowered left arm held a chain.

A silver pocket watch hung at the bottom of the silver chain, but the center of the watch had been torn out.

“You attacked me with a piercing concept, didn’t you? Since the concept attack could pierce through any material, you would have received the same tactile feedback regardless of what you hit. …You assumed that meant you had hit me, you failed to actually check what you had hit, and this is the result.”

He threw the silver watch aside and it clattered to the ground below the mist.

He then turned his expressionless face her way, let out a white breath, and took a fighting stance.

“Let us continue.”

As soon as he said that, a sound came from the watch on his right wrist.

That signal told him it was almost one minute until the concept extraction was complete.

The ringing alarm would ring once every five seconds.

It would ring twelve times before completion. Understanding that, Mikoku

listened to that first ring.

“Do you think you can win?”

She raised her twin blades and looked back at him.

After the previous hit, she had slight tears in the corners of the eyes below her confident eyebrows, but she did not wipe them away.

“Shinjou will-…”

“She will not.”

He cut her off and the alarm rang a second time.

Regardless, he spoke.

“I promised to be with Shinjou-kun and she promised the same. So…”

He almost seemed to fall toward her.

“So if I do not give up, neither will she!”

He dashed forward.

He was coming for her.

Sayama whipped up the wind and scattered charms like wings. Mikoku blew away the mist and exposed the light of her two swords.

Sayama raised his fist.

“I will not lose her!!”

At the same time, they heard a rumbling sound.

The church shook with the great sound of something being absorbed.

The church’s trembling song was telling them the concept creation was nearly ready.

It sang and sang.

That house of teaching played its song loudly as if rejoicing at the coming new world.

“_____”

The two of them collided and sent the mist flying as that sound washed over them.

●

Sayama swung his fist.

He blew the mist away and kept up a barrage with quick footwork.

These were not powerful finishing blows. He tensed his shoulders, made quick steps with his heels, and released countless rapid straight punches.

He stuck to his left hand, but that was fine.

Mikoku was faster than him and she could attack more often than him.

Her two swords were especially troublesome. The philosopher’s stone swords were made from the positive and negative concepts, so he could not intercept them without using the opposite Georgius.

However, there was a hole: she could only attack once at a time with either arm.

If he turned his left shoulder toward her and faced her right arm, the blue sword in her right hand became the only attack she could use.

The alarm rang for the third time.

He was to her right side, so the red sword in her left hand could not reach him.

Also, a fist could attack again more quickly than a sword.

He kept his fist flying and she started fighting a primarily defensive battle.

Whenever he stepped forward, she was forced to step back, so she could not make use of her maneuverability.

He sent out a straight left punch.

That was a fundamental movement and his feet brought him ever forward.

He stuck to the fundamentals.

But even though anyone could use these techniques, he used them to confront Mikoku.

He remained calm, kept himself from rushing, sent his fist accurately forward, and targeted her face or gut whenever he saw an opening.

"…!"

The force of the hit produced mist and a loud noise.

The reactionary force reached his shoulder, giving him tactile feedback.

Mikoku's face twisted in confusion and she looked to her sword, but the prediction concept on the blue sword's surface only said "straight left".

There was nothing she could do about the attacks even if she could predict them and Sayama picked up even more speed.

The barrage continued.

The alarm rang for the fourth time.

He took the step on 1, planted his foot on 2, and both sent the strike from his shoulder and pulled it back on 3.

On the count of 1, 2, 3, he would hear the spraying sound of impact.

It was all the fundamentals.

He took the fundamental 1, 2, 3, and heard the spray.

He focused. He focused on the 1, 2, 3.

He stuck with it the entire time. There was nothing but the 1, 2, 3.

This was the very first thing he had learned long ago.

When his life had been in turmoil after losing his father and losing his mother, he had learned this as a way of focusing his strength.

On 1, he moved forward. On 2, he stepped down. On 3, he released his strength.

1 and 2 and 3.

1 and 2 and 3.

1, 2, 3.

1.

2.

3.

Spray.

1.

2.
3.
Spray.
The alarm rang for the fifth time.
1, 2, 3, spray.
123, spray. 123spray.
123spray123spray. 123spray.
123123sprayspray.
123123123sprayspraypray
123123123sp23ray2sp3ray1sp23rayspraypray.
The barrage continued as the alarm rang for the sixth time.
“Ohh.”
The movement of his fist had permeated his body and would not stop.
1, 2, and 3. 2, 2, and 3.
He continued punching, raised his speed, and pursued the evading enemy. He pursued the enemy who wielded the power of a god.
“Ohhh!!”
His fist was not reaching her. Despite the great speed of his barrage, he could not strike her concept-increased speed.
But he knew he would reach her. No matter how close to godhood she came and no matter how much she injured him…
…*As long as I do not give up!!*
He listened to the seventh ring of the alarm, but he raised his speed regardless.
“————!”
His arm had been worn down by the blade, he had scratches on his cheek, and wounds from the piercing blade tip covered his chest and stomach.
But he did not care. He did not look at them or even feel them.
He only had his subconscious that guided his fundamental movements and…
…*Shinjou-kun.*
That thought resided within him.
He rapidly linked 1 to 2 to 3.
“If I do not give up…”
He launched his fist.
“Neither will you!!”
He caught her.
The speed of his arm had surpassed her swordplay.
His fist pushed on the base of the blade and knocked it aside.
“———!”
He pulled back his left arm and stepped forward while leaning somewhat forward.
1.
He straightened up and stomped his foot down as if thrusting his entire body

forward.

2.

He turned his shoulders inward, tensed them, twisted his left arm inward, and launched it.

3.

His fist landed on the left side of her face.

The fundamental strike tore into her flesh and bone.

She was knocked back a little, but she stood back up straight.

Her legs slid back, she controlled her stance, and she sent her right sword toward Sayama's left fist.

"You are wasting your time!"

But Sayama moved quickly. He suddenly rushed straight toward Mikoku.

After attacking from the left so many times, he had gone to the center as soon as his opponent attacked to the left.

The center was where the left and right crossed paths.

Sayama raised his right arm that he had barely used up to this point.

"Right arm unleashed!"

He threw both fists toward his opponent.

The alarm rang for the eighth time.

He rushed Mikoku with his unending combination blow.

He pushed on through.

He moved quickly with both of his fists.

Meanwhile, Mikoku raised both swords for defense.

"You only have four rings left!"

He did not care. He raised the speed of his fists, telling them to reach her defending swords.

He told them to break the swords. He told them to break them to pieces.

…Break through, powers of the left and right!

The positive and negative powers of the ten worlds were defending. Those swords contained the beneficial powers of ten great worlds, some of which contained gods.

However, Sayama poured his strength into his fists and thought to them.

…Break through!

What were his fists for?

"My…"

He let out a roar.

"My fists should be able to break through the defenses of the gods!"

He poured speed into his fists.

He swept away the spraying mist and targeted his other self.

That version of himself had desired death and tried to make that her answer.

I cannot allow that.

How could I allow it?

There is so much more to the happy mealtime found on the table of this

lowest world, but she has already stood from her seat. I must punish this foolish girl for her poor manners.

Eat all of the food served you and then die.

“I simply cannot allow it!”

But his other self bared her teeth beyond her swords and the spray of her divine speed.

“You do not understand!”

His other self shouted back as the alarm rang for the ninth time.

“You do not understand what it feels like to lose something so important to you!”

Those words brought pain to his chest, but he released his right fist and continued his barrage as he gave a shout of his own.

“Of course I do not!! I intend to never understand the words of someone who chose her own death and thus tried to place that same pain on others!! That is all I have to say!!”

The reverberation of the hit reached his shoulder.

“You chose your own death, so why can you not celebrate someone else’s death!?”

“Do not profane Shino’s death!”

His arms shook from the impacts of his continued barrage.

The defensive swords grew sharper, cut through the wind, and struck the sound.

Their fists and swords were now clashing directly between them.

Mikoku gave a shout amid the speed and sparks. Her sweat flew into the air and a pained look covered her face.

“You will be the same as me before long!”

After all…

“Shinjou will lose her life soon! And by the very power I used!”

Those words filled Sayama’s entire body with pain and she did not overlook it.

Her blue sword shot up toward his chest from below.

It stabbed into him.

●

Diana struggled against the dragon of wind.

“!!”

The swelling wind rushed toward her.

It was a great pressure.

She was about to fall forward, but the wind was enough to scoop her up from below.

She could not even hear her own breathing anymore, but…

“This time…!”

She held strength in her hand and she swung that hand forward as a fist.

She was less than a meter away. If she could fill that distance, she was certain

she could save the girl.

She would be able to save her.

She had always regretted not going to save the others in the past, so she did not give up here.

…I…

“I *can* go save someone!!”

She thought of her former comrades, of those who had survived to this day, of the people she had met since then, of her adorable student, of everyone dependent on her, and of the people she was sure to meet in the future.

There was a girl who referred to her as her teacher.

How did she feel about that?

…I…

Did she want to be called that? Was that who she truly wanted to be?

She had a single answer.

“Testament!!”

She slowly dragged her feet forward.

She split apart the wind that was as thick as water and carried what she held in her right hand.

But then she heard a sound. It came from a machine that was still operating after falling to the ground.

Shinjou’s heartrate and blood pressure were being expressed with an electronic tone.

That tone had become the representation of a straight line.

Diana knew what that meant. Every part of Shinjou had come to a stop.

But…

“That is only under the effects of ‘Mikoku’!!”

Go. Reach her.

…Reach her!!

She saw the wind gently begin to move ahead of her. Behind the solid power reaching Diana, the wind sought Shinjou’s back and tried to settle itself inside her.

It was trying to fulfill its role and carve Shinjou’s life.

The wind dropped toward Shinjou, but Diana had not arrived.

She was thirty-one centimeters short.

The pressure of the wind grew as the dragon descended and Diana’s expression twisted as she failed to reach the girl.

“…!!”

She shouted something.

That was when strength wrapped tightly around her back and pushed her.

“!?”

It came from powerful arms that opposed the wind.

“Diana, Diana. What are you doing? …This lowly dragon is no match for you.”

Odor was there.

Behind her, she saw Odor, Roger, the development department, and plenty more all in a line. The operating room's door was wide open and they were pushing her forward from all the way back into the corridor.

She heard all of their voices as they flooded into the operating room and supported her back.

They were saying "go", "go get that thing", or "we're counting on you".

She heard one voice among them all.

"Diana, shedding tears of anger has always been a bad habit of yours."

It was Itaru.

Those words from someone who knew her past told her something.

She was where she was now because of her past.

"Then…!"

She faced forward and raised her eyebrows. Metallic sounds rang out as Odor helped by tearing into the wind and she felt the support of Yui, Tsukuyomi, and the doctors as they got back up.

…Everyone…

She spoke to all of those people from the past.

…I will save this girl!

"We were left something thanks to all of you!!"

She broke through the wind and covered the last bit of distance.

She took Shinjou's hand which was reaching out as if asking for help.

She took that slender hand and slipped on what she had found on the floor.

It was a ring.

It was the one Shinjou had been wearing.

"This is Yume's ring!"

And…

"She would have been wearing it when she was hit by the life-carving attack under the effects of 2nd-Gear's Concept Core! So this ring holds the greatest life-giving protection of Yume!!" [1]

The ring had not been as effective as it might have because it had been removed, but that was also why it had not had to endure the greatest power of the "Mikoku" concept and had survived.

Diana heard something.

She listened to the electronic tone telling her Shinjou's life signs had come to a stop, but she still grasped the hand bearing Yume's protection.

"Please… Wake up!!"

●

Shinjou sat below a vast sky.

…Huh?

It had happened suddenly.

She sat on an aged wooden box and she seemed to have suddenly woken.

"Huhh?"

She wore a white armored uniform and she checked on her surroundings.

“A pier?”

She was at one end of a wharf.

The wharf bordered the water and the great expanse of water behind her looked white.

She could see the sky, but the bottom was covered in fog.

She saw something like a mountain beyond the warehouse in front of her.

The wharf continued as far as she could see to the left and to her right…

“The pier and…a ship.”

A passenger ship was moored at the pier. It was a large white ship.

There was a line of people from the pier to where she was. The line continued past the front of the warehouse and on into the distance. Everyone was too lightly dressed for the chilly air and they carried luggage with them, but they also had the unique atmosphere of anticipation found in lines.

Wondering what was happening, Shinjou tried to think back.

…Um, what was I doing before I woke up here?

“Huh?”

She could not remember.

Why not?

“Huh?”

She lightly hit her head as if knocking water from her ear, but…

“Huhh?”

She could not remember where she had been or what she had been doing.

She tried seeing what she *could* remember.

“Huh?”

The word “Shinjou” came to mind. She could remember that word pointed to her.

She also knew what her clothes were and she knew the meaning of the nouns “sky” and “fog”.

However…

“…”

Something was missing from her memories.

She crossed her arms and tilted her head to try to forcibly recall whatever it was.

“Um…”

As she muttered to herself, she felt a painful itching in her back. It was a small tremor-like pain.

That sensation led her to realize something rather than remember it.

…I…

“I’m injured, aren’t I?”

She had been hurt and she had found herself here when she woke up.

The scenery around her did not seem real and silent people were waiting for a boat.

That boat would take them to the opposite shore.

“Is this…?”

She speculated out loud.

“A near death experience?”

She seemed to still remember the oddest things.

However, she did remember this.

It was not quite a memory, but she had a feeling there had not been an afterlife in whatever place she had come from.

In that case, what she was seeing here was not actually real.

“This is a dream my body is showing me as it approaches death.”

She lacked her memories and anything related to her memories because it was all shutting down.

The last remaining movements of her brain were showing her this image at the very end.

It was only a dream that represented vanishing as a trip to somewhere else.

“I see,” she muttered. “So I’m going to die.”

She had no memories, so she had no reason to hesitate.

She guessed she actually had a lot of people she would not want to leave, but…

“Do I really? Reality can be cruel.”

She nodded twice.

“That’s right. I probably lived somewhere filled with eccentrics. Somewhere with people who would grope my breasts without end or grab and tug on my boy side.”

She smiled bitterly.

“Of course, no one that crazy could actually exist.”

I guess I’ll be boarding that and riding away, she thought as she looked to the ship.

Suddenly, a sound reached her ears.

It was a song.

“——————”

She knew it, but she did not remember it. She did not know what it was, but she had not forgotten it.

…What is this?

What is this song? It’s coming from the ship. No, from far beyond the ship. From beyond the water? What is it?

She got down from the wooden box.

The concrete ground felt a bit uncertain below her feet as she approached the ship.

A sudden thought came to her. Even if she had no memories, her presence here meant one thing at least.

…I had to have had a mom and dad, didn’t I?

If so…

“Will I be able to see them if I get on that ship?”

Those two people were missing from her memories, but were they on the opposite coast where the song was coming from?

Someone spoke to her as she pondered that.

“Oh, what have we here? Are you lost?”

She gave a start at the sudden voice from the water’s edge.

She turned to the side and found an elderly man sitting on a mooring rope.

He had gray hair and wore a suit.

He brushed a hand through his slicked-back hair and looked at her.

“If you are going to board the ship, you need to wait in line.”

“Oh, right. …Sorry.”

When she bowed, he narrowed his eyes and nodded.

“Where did you come from?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Do you have any luggage?”

She looked down at her hands.

Her eyes moved from her empty hands to the box she had been sitting on, but…

“Um… I don’t think so.”

“You must have been in quite a hurry then. So…do you not have any flower words either?”

“Flower words?”

She looked to the elderly man and he jerked his chin toward the people in the line.

They all carried luggage in one hand, but there was something odd about their other hand.

That opposite hand seemed to be carrying something near their shoulder.

“Do they…have something there?”

“We call them flower words. They are something everyone has. Everyone.”

He looked to the line of people.

“They are the things people have accomplished.”

Shinjou looked too and it felt like they were all holding a bouquet of flowers.

She could not find a way to describe them with words and their form was unclear even though she could see them.

They started up from the people’s hands and continued on to heaven.

“Are they…heavy?”

“Some people want them to be. Some people would rather they be light.”

The elderly man said “look” and pointed beyond the mountain visible through the fog.

“The people who think they have too few or too many will circle around that mountain again and again while carrying their flower words. If you do that, you are given weight, even if it is only a temporary form. …Of course, you end up going around and around for thousands or even tens of thousands of years. Some

jokingly call it hell. Most of the people here are happy people who have no such complaints."

"Th-then I…"

She did not have what this man called flower words.

He looked back at her and tilted his head.

"Did you already go through the reception process before coming here?"

He pulled a cigar from his pocket and used it to point at the end of the pier where the passengers were checked before boarding.

There, they would hand over their luggage and…

…They put their flower words in their pocket.

"Their existences are made equal with the world using the plucked flowers and words."

"Eh?"

"The opposite shore is a different kind of place. There, what you have accomplished is what matters," said the elderly man. "What did you do for the world? Those actions are what make up your existence. To put it another way, the opposite shore is where all accomplishments since the beginning of the world are gathered. You could call it the world itself."

After saying that, he faced Shinjou again and she looked to him.

"You know everything, don't you? …By any chance, are you god?"

"Ha ha ha. I am even greater than that."

"Oh, wow."

Just as some surprise filled Shinjou, a voice called out from behind.

"Father, I told you to stop coming over here!"

The elderly man gave a joking shout at the woman's voice.

A woman in a white denim shirt and jeans entered Shinjou's field of vision.

Her semi-long hair swayed and she grabbed the elderly man by the ear.

"Your friends aren't all going to show up just because you're waiting here."

"Now, wait just a second. Two I could do without arrived recently, so the idiot of a little monkey I've really been waiting for might just-…"

"You accursed old man!!"

He cried out as the woman pulled on his ear.

She sighed but raised her eyebrows a little when she glanced over at Shinjou.

"Oh? Are you lost?"

"Oh, no, not really…"

Shinjou frantically waved her hands.

"I-I'll go get in line. Yeah."

"Do you know where to go?"

"Yes," she answered. "Where I can hear that song coming from, right?"

The elderly man and the woman exchanged a glance at that.

Finally, the woman turned back to her.

"Why are you here?"

For some reason, being asked that caused some small pieces of her memories

to return.

"Um," she began while thinking. "My life…was carved."

She nodded.

"So there must be no saving me. It's a pretty strong power, so even though I think there must be a lot of different people trying to save me, it won't be enough against that power. So, um…"

"Do you want to go to the other side? To the other side of that water?"

After some thought, Shinjou nodded.

The song she could hear sounded very soft and she wanted to give herself over to it.

"If I go to that song…"

She nodded again.

"If I go there, I'll find my mom and dad."

"I see."

The woman nodded too and took a step toward Shinjou.

She stood in front of her, crouched down, and placed her hands on Shinjou's shoulders.

"Are you sure you want that?"

Shinjou thought about it while wondering why the woman would ask that.

"Well, I'm going to die, aren't I? There's nothing anyone can do since my life has been carved, I can find my mom and dad if I go to the other side, and…"

She breathed in.

"And there won't be any more pain or troubles."

"I see."

The woman nodded and her slightly sharp eyes bent in a troubled look.

"Then let me ask you one thing. Why…?"

She asked it.

"Why are you crying?"

Eh? thought Shinjou as she started to bring her hands to her cheeks.

But the woman's hands moved and held Shinjou's hands as if to tell her not to.

Shinjou was standing straight, so she could not hide anything.

"Ah…"

She could feel tears spilling from her eyes.

Everything grew blurry: what she saw, her previously calm emotions, and even her words.

"No…"

She cried without knowing why. She cried in search of something missing from her memories.

She shed tears in her dream.

●

Mikoku felt her attack hit. She felt the tip of her blade sink about three centimeters deep and strike his ribs.

Sayama had bent his body forward as if ducking.

Mikoku had swung her left sword toward his back.

“You can perish here before you know what it feels like to lose something so important!!”

But his back did not sink down and she heard his shouting voice.

“I will not perish!”

His voice trembled but contained great strength.

“There is no way I could perish!”

“That is a delusion, Sayama Mikoto!! The end is soon coming for Shinjou as well, isn’t it!?”

“No! It is not! That alone is certain!”

His roaring voice was accompanied by his body jumping upwards.

He raised his left fist a bit and opened his mouth.

“Something that has been confirmed between both parties is not a delusion!! It is…”

He surpassed his previous great speed and raised his fist with divine speed.

“A testament!!”

●

Shinjou cried.

“No…”

She did not understand.

She did not understand at all.

She truly did not understand anything.

But there was something in her heart she did not want to leave.

“I don’t want to go…”

She looked up in the sky as she spoke and she heard another voice.

“I see.”

A moment later, she saw the fog and waterside vanish in an instant.

She was no longer at a wharf. There was only concrete below her feet and a sea of clouds in every direction.

She also heard a song. It was a gentle song that felt nostalgic even though she did not remember it.

The woman stood in front of her and the elderly man was looking down into the sky behind the woman.

“Don’t worry.”

The woman released Shinjou’s hands as she spoke.

“You will be fine.”

“H-how can you say that?”

Shinjou used her freed hands to wipe away her tears.

“It’s over. I’m going to die. My life was carved… It was done by such a great power and, no matter who tries to save me, it won’t be enough.”

“You will be fine,” insisted the woman. “Do you remember your name?”

“Eh? Wh-what does that-…?”

“Just tell me. Do you remember it?”

Shinjou thought about it.

What was her name?

…Um.

I feel like it was a single character, but I also feel like it was two. I don’t get this. It’s like it keeps changing.

“You can’t remember?”

“W-well, how should I put this? I don’t really understand. …There are two things in my heart that I feel might be it, but I’m not sure which one it is.”

“Simple,” said the elderly man with his back to her. “Why not combine the two?”

When she heard that, it hit Shinjou.

“Ungiri!!” [2]

“That has a somewhat vulgar ring to it.”

“That’s just being mean!”

The women laughed quietly at their exchange. *I was being serious,* thought Shinjou as she glared at the women, so the woman apologized with her shoulders still shaking.

“Sorry, sorry. It’s just that you’re a lot like a friend of mine. Yes, you really are a lot like her. …Anyway, do you know the answer now?”

“Yes.” Shinjou nodded. “I think it’s Sadagiri.”

“I see. That would be the name of one who carries life and cuts through destiny,” said the woman. “Your mother hid the character for life in your name so that your life would not be harmed. And…your life lies elsewhere too.”

“E-elsewhere?”

“Yes.” The woman shrugged. “The name of the one by your side is Mikoto. Written with another character, that means life. So…”

The woman gently rubbed Shinjou’s head.

“As long as he lives, no one can harm your life.”

Shinjou heard a song behind her.

When she heard the gentle singing voice, she realized the song was not calling for her.

…It’s celebrating a birth? It’s sending someone on their way?

Who was singing it? And…

“By any chance…am I the only one that can hear this song?”

Neither the woman nor the elderly man answered.

The two of them simply took a step out of the way, bringing the top of the clouds covering the vast sky into view.

“Can you wish for the person those tears yearned for?”

Shinjou was looking straight ahead now.

“…Yes.”

She did not understand. She did not understand at all. She truly did not

understand anything.

But she could say one thing for sure: she had someone.

Then she felt something touch her right hand.

She looked over and saw the woman had removed her ring and placed it on Shinjou's hand instead.

"Th-this…"

"It's fine. Think of it as a protective charm. And you know what?" asked the woman's smile. "Reach out your hand, spread your fingers, and make sure you reach it."

Shinjou nodded and moved forward.

She stood on the edge of the concrete ground and looked into the bottomless sky.

It's time to go, she thought before looking back.

She tilted her head as she looked back and forth between the elderly man and the woman.

"This is a dream I'm having on the verge of death, isn't it?"

"Ha ha ha. You must be very creative."

It felt weird having her own dream compliment her.

What is with that? she wondered.

"If I do wake up, what will happen to me? What kind of person will be by my side?"

"Well." The elderly man nodded and crossed his arms. "It will probably be a weird kid. He is an incurable idiot, but he had quite a skilled, wonderful, and magnificent relative. So make sure you get after him if he sullies the name of that relative."

"You really need to be more honest, father."

"I-I see you are as blunt as ever!"

Shinjou tilted her head a bit at their exchange.

"Well, whatever. I'll be going."

She did not hesitate to take a step from the edge.

"Oh?"

She heard the woman's surprised exclamation behind her because, instead of stepping "off" into the air, she took a solid step.

She was flying. She begged herself to reach the place she wished to be.

But she did more than just wish.

…I need to make sure I reach it!!

She leaped with all of her might and flung herself into the sky.

She reached her right hand out, spread her fingers wide, and thought.

…I need to reach my life.

"I need to go as far as my life will take me!!"

●

Just as the alarm sounded for the tenth time, Mikoku swung down her left

sword.
Sayama responded with a left uppercut.
Mikoku was willing to take that blow.
Even if she let it hit her…
…I can cut him down with my left sword!
In a cross counter, the side with a sword had a significant advantage, so she gathered strength in her left shoulder.
In that instant, something entered the center of her vision.
It was colored silver.
…A watch!?
It was a pocket watch.
It was the one she had stabbed when she thought she had stabbed into Sayama's chest.
She remembered him showing it to her and throwing it aside.
It had vanished into the mist, but now it was thrown at her from below.
"…!"
She did not even blink.
The solid silver object hit her in the center of the forehead.
It made a dull sound.
The watch was opened and it slightly obstructed her view.
She chose to continue attacking, but she could not see in front of her due to the watch.
…Oh, no!
Sayama had been swinging his left fist in an uppercut, but…
…What if he was actually using that fist to throw the watch?
He might have reversed his motion and thrown his right fist.
Or he might have thrown the watch to make her think that while continuing with the left.
Which was it?
"!"
She gave her answer.
"Both!!"
She forcibly brought her arms together and sent both swords forward.
There was no way she could miss at this close range.
She swung the two blades in a straight line as if letting them drop down.
She performed a slashing attack.
She drew two sharp arcs as the watch fell and her vision cleared.
She could see now.
Sayama was right in front of her and she saw his movement.
…The left fist!
But that no longer mattered.
Her swords were going to hit his shoulders.
Sayama then made his move.

The clenched strength of his left fist drew an arc through the air.

“————!!”

Mikoku realized he had hit.

But his fist had not hit her body. It had instead hit the side of her blue sword.

“Wha-…!?”

●

Diana saw it on the forefront of the wind’s pressure.

The wind dragon overhead very nearly had a physical form as it plunged down toward Shinjou’s back.

…Did it not work!?

She clenched her teeth as if in protest.

There was nothing more she could do. She distinctly felt her limits.

But in that instant, something shot upwards in front of her.

It was a blue cloth, the one draped over Shinjou’s body.

Next, Diana saw the color black spread out.

It was hair.

“…!?”

Shinjou’s black hair danced in the wind.

Her slender body quickly sat up and she raised her right arm.

“————!!”

Her fingers were spread wide and the ring on her ring finger collided with the descending dragon.

It only took an instant.

終わりのクロニクル

Yume's ring tore into the dragon and Shinjou's fingers closed around it and squeezed.

"!!"

It vanished with an explosion of wind.

All that remained was stillness and Shinjou's voice as she looked to heaven with her fingers clenched shut.

"Sayama-kun!!"

●

Sayama's blow landed.

His left fist struck the falling blue sword from the left.

The collision coincided with the eleventh ring of the alarm.

…But I will not let it end here!

He swung his right arm to support his attack.

A charm activated.

As he rapidly swung his entire body to the left, his attack was launched through the mist.

"Go!"

He cried out and clenched his fist in the moment of impact.

"Tear into the power of a god!!"

His right fist intercepted Mikoku's red sword from the side as it approached just above his head.

Both of his fists punched the swords on the outside surface.

"…!!"

Catching the two blades between his fists did more than just stop them.

His red and blue punches smashed the two swords together and they both broke.

However, this was not a destruction that called in their regeneration.

"This is the mutual annihilation of the positive and negative concepts!!"

Sure enough, the two swords exploded in Mikoku's hands.

They turned to sand and light.

In a split second, the concept swords completely vanished.

All that remained was Mikoku, who sat there blankly after swinging down her swords, and…

"Ohhh!"

…Go!

Sayama stepped forward with his right foot.

●

An instant of movement brought everything to a stop.

Sayama dropped his heel to the floor and launched the end of his right arm from his twisted shoulder.

He began a barrage.

Eight consecutive attacks left his right shoulder like rapid-firing gun and collided with Mikoku's body.

Dull sounds rang out and Mikoku bent backwards.

Sayama took another step forward.

…The right!

He had a single target, Mikoku's chest and what lay there.

"Top-Gear's power!!"

He struck it and then made his next attack.

…The left!

He made a full rotation and a full spin.

He seemed to simply place his left fist at the end of that motion.

"————!!"

He made his punch.

The front of his fist broke through the mist and surpassed sound.

The blow landed and he heard the sound of a shattering philosopher's stone.

All of his strength was driven into Mikoku's body as if to suppress the shattering sound.

For a brief moment, the impact built up inside her.

"!!"

But then she flew into the air.

Mist wrapped around her as she flew, but Sayama did not look to see where she ended up.

He spread the fingers of his outstretched left arm and looked to the ring on the finger there.

Sweat fell from his cheeks to his jaw, but…

"Shinjou-kun."

He straightened up.

He spun around with mist covering his body and he looked up at the moon.

In front of that moon, the bell in the small room was not moving.

The automaton named Noah remained motionless with the bell's cord in hand.

The facility was no longer shaking.

The final stained glass window remained dark and the church's shaking had stopped.

The place almost seemed to be enjoying the serenity of the night.

However…

"Oh."

There was no longer any sound from Sayama's right wrist.

The alarm to indicate the time limit was gone.

The sound to indicate the end of the battle had vanished into Noah's night.

●

A staircase was filled with slight darkness.

It was a plastic staircase.

It cut diagonally through an empty space with no supports and neither its top nor bottom could be seen.

It was simply a long flight of stairs that continued both up and down.

In the otherwise empty darkness, there were two sounds traveling along that series of steps.

They were sets of footsteps.

One included a clank of metal and seemed to be having trouble.

The other coincided with the first and was much quieter.

The quieter set belonged to a maid in black who asked a question of the man in black walking ahead of her.

“Itaru-sama, where does this staircase lead?”

“Hell.”

The maid nodded as the man continued on without even looking back, but after a few seconds she clapped her hands as if just realizing something.

“Tes. That was a very, very, very, very funny joke. I can objectively determine that I am overjoyed to have heard your super joke.”

“Oh? You certainly make your joy sound like it isn’t yours, you eccentric machine.”

“Tes.” Sf nodded and kept herself precisely one step behind Itaru. “As I have no emotions, I cannot make a subjective determination on the subject, so I determined I could express joy by using my praise circuits and applauding you. How was it, Itaru-sama? Which best describes how you feel about my joy over your joke: 1. Wonderful. 2. You are a great doll. 3. I am the happiest person in the Tripartite Pact. …Those are all of your options. Which will it be?”

“4. You’re as awful as ever.”

Sf nodded.

“I am the same as ever?” she asked expressionlessly. “Tes. In other words, your feelings have numbed over at how unchangeably great I am.”

“You certainly are amazing.”

“Tes. Thank you for the compliment. Now, I have a suggestion. So that you can truly appreciate how great I am normally, how about I do a few horrible things to you for a while?”

“For example?”

“I could say awful things to you, do rude things to you, and cause trouble around you.”

“I have a feeling you already have those things covered.”

“Tes.” Sf nodded. “Of course I do. I am skilled at my job, after all.”

“You just answered on reflex without thinking what that meant, didn’t you!?”

Itaru stopped walking and turned to face Sf.

Even with the height difference of the step, he had to look down at the maid.

“Well, whatever. Any messages from the others?”

“Tes.” She tilted her head to clear her ears. “You have seven hundred and sixty five messages.”

“How long have those been piling up!?”

“You never asked about them, so, if my memory serves, since around August.”

“Read me the most recent ones.”

Sf tilted her head at the anger barely suppressed below his voice.

She stared expressionlessly up at his face.

“Itaru-sama, why do you look so angry? …Has something unpleasant happened?”

“Yes. You want to know what it was? Well, you know what?”

He nodded.

“The source of the unpleasantness? Right in front of me.”

“Tes.” Sf nodded. “So it was sentence fragments.”

Sf watched for about eight seconds as Itaru began beating on the railing with his metal cane.

Once he placed his hand on the railing and tried to catch his breath, she responded.

“First, it seems Shinjou-sama has gone to sleep in the medical room. This time, they say it is a normal sleep. She was carried to a bed and they are waiting for her to wake.”

“Well, she was fighting a concept. That will wear you out. …What else?”

“Sayama-sama has stopped the concept creation.”

“Oh?”

Itaru straightened up and said something more.

“Then the world is going to change.”

“…? Itaru-sama, what do you mean? Sayama-sama stopped it.”

Itaru turned his back on her without answering.

He resumed his descent of the stairs and at a quicker pace than before.

Sf hurried after him by jumping down the few steps she had fallen behind.

“Itaru-sama.”

She called out to him. Normally, he would have ignored it, but…

“Sf.”

She heard him call back.

“What do you think is the true form of the Leviathan Road?”

“Tes.” She answered while stepping down the stairs. “To respond to the activation of the negative concepts, they will release the positive concepts to tune the world.”

“Then I have two questions.”

Itaru came to a stop.

“What did Mikoku do? And…what will happen now that she was stopped?”

“Tes.”

Sf started to answer but never actually did.

Silence followed.

As her thoughts and decisions grew in length, Itaru spoke.

“Mikoku understood and Sayama lost. He lost as the villain. He won the

battle, but he lost the game. …At the very, very end, the Leviathan Road was stolen from him.”

He took a breath.

“The ending…is about to begin.”

---

[1] Yume means “admonition of life”.

[2] Another reading of the characters for Sadagiri.

Chapter 12

“Continuation of the End”

The dragon’s roar reverberates without end

●

Sayama moved through the white mist in the open-air church.

He stood in front of the positive Concept Core sealing devices on the port wall.

He planned to use the manual release to purge the pallets visible through the devices' small windows.

They had a standard purge process and he found something next to the console.

"Is this an instruction guide?"

He frowned as he followed the instructions by moving the emergency lever up, up, down, down, pressed the button, completed the purge procedure on the console, and released the manual lock with the following sequence: right, left, right, left.

He finally held the seal button in the center of the console for a full five seconds.

After all that, the sealing devices vibrated.

A look through the windows showed the outer shells of the internal pallets slowly descending.

…And into the sky.

The positive Concept Core pallets fell into the empty air at eight thousand meters up.

Several lights were flying above the ground below.

They were mechanical dragons.

Sayama continued his work, assuming they would catch the pallets.

Spare pallets rose to fill the gaps left by the previous ones.

He sighed as he watched them fit into place.

Heo had called his cellphone earlier. According to Diana, Shinjou had recovered and he could relax.

Shinjou was apparently sleeping and calling for him in her sleep.

"Thank goodness," he muttered. "It seems the lovey-dovey connection between our hearts really does tie us together."

He breathed a sigh of relief and rested his back on the tilted portion of one sealing device.

I have finished everything I need to do for the moment, he told himself.

A philosopher's stone to resurrect the dead would no longer be created.

They needed to take the positive Concept Cores back for the moment and have the Gear representatives confirm their presence. The later release of the concepts would happen here, but…

…It would foster the most trust to have the Gear representatives bring the Concept Cores here.

Releasing the concepts would suppress the activated negative concepts by releasing them along with the positive concepts.

The Leviathan Road had been meant to gather those positive Concepts Cores, and…

…The Leviathan of the Leviathan Road was the Concept Cores of the ten Gears, wasn't it?

In Biblical mythology, the Leviathan was a great dragon said to bear the forms of all beasts. In the age of that mythology, the Leviathan was known as a dragon large enough to surround the ocean said to exist at the ends of the world.

Releasing the concepts of the ten Gears would combine the ten dragons into one.

"We gather the dragons together, and…"

At that point, his body stiffened somewhat, but…

"!!"

He suddenly shot to his feet.

He had realized a very important fact.

●

Heo had ended her combination with Thunder Fellow, opened the canopy, and joined Kazami and the others on the mechanical dragon's back armor.

They were about two thousand meters up.

The wind was strong, but it was showing signs of weakening. And…

"The Vesper Cannon."

Thunder Fellow's frame had been exchanged for a long cannon.

Thunder Fellow had caught the pallet Sayama had purged from Noah and swapped out his parts.

Harakawa sat at the controls and was listening to the transmissions coming in.

"It sounds like Hiba combined with Susamikado and collected Keravnos down below. Also, the American UCAT mechanical dragon unit has secured all of the other Concept Cores except for the 10th and 6th ones that the president and treasurer have. So…"

Heo and the others looked up into the sky and wondered what to do now.

The ark floated in the moonlight like a giant cloud.

Sayama was there.

"Should we go pick him up?" asked Heo while munching on a broiled chestnut.

Kazami and Izumo nodded with G-Sp2 and V-Sw in hand.

"Shinjou's sleeping safe and sound, so this ends everything."

"Yeah, it's finally looking like we can safely get to the end of the year."

Everyone smiled bitterly at Izumo's comment.

An atmosphere of relief softened the air around them somewhat.

However…

"…?"

Heo was the first to notice.

It was a reverberation.
Some kind of odd reverberation had passed through her body.
…Eh?
Kazami noticed that she was looking around.
“What is it, Heo? Are you coming down with some strange disease? Or…”
She felt it again. She had definitely felt it this time.
She also noticed Kazami had stopped speaking and looked to her.
The two of them frowned and spoke to each other.
“K-Kazami, was that…?”
“Yes.” Kazami brought a troubled hand to her forehead. “I think I know what it was.”
“Y-you do?”
Kazami nodded with an entirely serious expression.
“Your perverted word replacement disease has infected me too, eros. I can feel it reverberating in my brain, eros.”
“Th-that can’t possibly…!”
It happened a third time and the reverberation was stronger than before.
This time, it seemed to have reached more than just her and Kazami.
Izumo brought a hand to his forehead and groaned.
“I-I feel like I too can speak Great Erosian, the official language of the Heolusion Kingdom, eros.”
“They have Artluman Eros there, eros.”
“Wh-why do you always use me for this kind of-…!?”
She felt it again.
There was no denying the powerful reverberation.
Also, she could tell which direction it was coming from.
“The Vesper Cannon?”
Harakawa was the one to answer her.
After looking at the console, he turned toward her.
“Heo.”
“Y-yes!?”
He nodded.
“The Vesper Cannon is reacting. For a bit now, it seems…”
As soon as he said that, she felt another reverberation.
But this one was not just the reaction from the Vesper Cannon.
It was ten times stronger.
It was not a sound or a vibration. It could only be called a reverberation.
“…!!”
An especially powerful reverberation came from Noah in the sky.

●

The inside of the church reverberated.
It was a powerful reverberation.

It seemed to lightly push up on one's body from below.

It began to gain a set rhythm.

It was the rhythm of a pulse.

The pulsating reverberation picked up speed and began making itself known outside the church.

Sayama had shot to his feet within that reverberation.

"Could it be…!?"

He ignored his disheveled hair and fluttering armored uniform as he rose to his feet and looked overhead.

The final stained glass light on the walls had not lit.

It had stopped.

However, that meant the other lights had not gone away.

"That means the ten negative concepts are still activating."

He saw a figure slowly rise from the mist floating above the floor.

She kept her back to him and brushed a hand through her hair.

"Toda Mikoku!"

He ran forward as he yelled at her. He raised his left fist toward her weak back.

"Did you hide your true aim!?"

She did not answer his raised voice, but something else did: the church.

One section of the mist floating off the floor suddenly rose. It looked like a table was lifting it from below.

More than one of those tables appeared, they were not small, and they arrived below Sayama's running feet as well.

"…!!"

He realized what this meant.

Noah had left its emergency halted state.

"Is it changing form!?"

●

After receiving first aid and combining with Susamikado in the forest, Hiba's mechanical vision saw the movement in the heavens.

There was a massive form covering the sky overhead.

"It's transforming?"

At first, it had been a tower.

Then it had been an ark.

The ark shape was the same as the one he had seen in the summer sky during a dream of the past.

But if Noah was changing now…

…Is this the same form as the night Osaka was destroyed?

He had not seen its entire form in that dream, but its armor panels would have been opened up.

However, the current transformation occurring overhead went beyond that.

The residential area Thunder Fellow and Alex had raced through was hidden below the armor. In its place, cannon turrets and the engines that moved the massive aerial ship's joints showed themselves.

But that was not all.

"Ryuuji-kun."

He heard Mikage's slightly deepened voice.

"That's evolution."

He understood. The armor panels and cannon turrets grew to increase their forms, cables automatically extended on their own, and the engines gained additional mounting points.

The overall form changed from the boxy ark to something that protruded out more.

"A great dragon."

It was now a draconic aerial warship measuring over fifteen kilometers long.

Clouds of mist appeared when the air struck different parts of its body and its full form could not be seen without the special sight provided by Susamikado.

However, that was why Hiba saw what he did.

The giant form continued to transform without end.

"What is this!? What is Noah!?"

Tatsumi had been sitting in the broken forest after surrendering, but she ran over.

She ran in front of the others to get a better look at Noah.

"What is the meaning of this!?"

Her voice roared upward even though it would never reach through the reverberating sky.

"Why is Noah entering full hostility mode, Mikoku!?"

●

The church split apart.

It split between the positive Concept Cores on the port side where Sayama stood, the negative Concept Cores on the starboard side, and the extractor on the front end where Mikoku stood.

The mist flowed like water into the opened space and the high-altitude wind rushed in.

There was an air defense filter in place, but Noah had begun a full transformation.

A great amount of wind poured in to carry the tremendous roar as far as possible.

The split in the floor rapidly grew and the distance between Sayama and Mikoku instantly expanded.

"Toda Mikoku!"

Sayama shouted through the wind at Mikoku who did not even look his way.

"Is what you really wanted about to begin!?"

She did not answer him, so he spoke more clearly.

He stated her apparent intent based on the current situation.

“Are you planning to use Noah to make the world immortal!?”

Her shoulders shook at that.

She finally turned around to face him from the pulpit’s floor as it began to rise.

The ends of her eyebrows were lowered in a troubled smile.

That expression acted like a surprise attack and left Sayama speechless, but her smiling lips opened to speak.

“I apologize for essentially deceiving you. It is true I was unable to create an immortality philosopher’s stone, but I was able to fully take back the data on the positive Concept Cores.”

She took a breath.

“Noah is currently suppressing its power.”

“I am sure it is,” he replied while looking overhead while their distance grew even greater.

The automaton Noah stood next to the bell above the pulpit and she looked down at him expressionlessly.

“I am still carrying out my orders. Over.”

Sayama explained what he thought those orders were.

“The command to create an immortality concept to resurrect the dead still exists inside Noah, doesn’t it?”

“Testament. The positive Concept Cores were purged just now, but that is why I will recreate the positive concepts from scratch and use them and the negative concepts to recreate the immortality concept instead of just producing a philosopher’s stone. Over.”

Noah gave her answer.

“I will not fail in my orders. I am a hard-worker who will undoubtedly fulfill them.”

Noah said one thing more.

“That is the personality my creator gave me. Over.”

Sayama looked to the moving floor.

He could see Noah’s surface armor through the gap there and that armor was expanding in preparation for battle.

“Toda Mikoku. I realized something from what Noah said. I realized what you are really trying to do by continuing the concept creation.”

“And that is?”

He kept his eyes on Noah’s preparation for battle visible through the gap in the floor.

“Noah’s transformation is an act of defense taken because she realized she can now continue after having her orders interrupted by our attacks. And this is a desperate defense because she is in Low-Gear, the unknown land of her enemy, and because she has almost no allies. But…”

He breathed in there and pointed across to the starboard wall that was now more than fifty meters away.

The light there indicated the control of the negative Concept Cores.

He more strongly pointed at the glowing stained glass windows.

“The negative concepts are beginning to activate, so to obtain the conceptual balance needed to create the immortality concept, she must send the positive concepts out of control and disseminate the newly-created immortality concept throughout the world. And that means…”

His voice rose to a shout.

“An explosive release of every concept! Not only that, but the release of the new immortality concept will overwrite Low-Gear’s parent string vibration and destroy the world! …Are you trying to destroy and recreate the world, Toda Mikoku!?”

●

Mikoku’s embarrassed smile did not change when she heard Sayama’s voice.

She simply nodded.

“That is exactly right. To control the activated negative concepts, Noah will create the positive concepts and activate them. I will use that power to create an immortality concept and…”

She breathed in.

“And the world will be made immortal by the explosion of uncontrollable positive and negative concepts within Noah. That will greatly change the world’s parent string vibration and everyone alive will likely be destroyed.”

“Do you really think I will let you do that!?”

Sayama raised his voice.

“Toda Mikoku! I swear to you I will settle the battle between us as the representative of the current world! I will destroy Noah and stop the both of you!”

“That is not possible,” said Mikoku dismissively.

She was already several meters above him and she brought a hand to her throat.

She placed her fingers on her armored uniform’s collar and looked down at the gauntlets on his hands.

“It seems Low-Gear’s ultimate weapon is the concept-destroying Georgius, but…look at this.”

She grabbed her collar and opened it.

Sayama looked there.

Moonlight washed over the blue philosopher’s stone on her skin. And…

“Do you understand now? You destroyed this, but it has already returned to normal.”

Sure enough, the stone was emitting blue light.

The light was powerful and pulsating.

Sayama gasped when he saw the light, but Mikoku gave him no expression in return.

“You may be able to destroy it, but it seems you cannot erase it or remove it. I suppose that is as far as Georgius can go.”

She quietly looked down at him.

“Your power cannot reach me. Do you still wish to settle this, Sayama?”

“Of course.”

“I see.” She nodded. “Then you should learn what kind of power Top-Gear had. And…just how much we cared for Low-Gear ten years ago.”

“What?”

She hung her head a little and a somewhat self-deprecatory smile appeared on her lips.

“We did not use our great fighting force back then specifically because we cared for that world, but I will use it here. I intend to take everything back in this world: Shino, everyone from Top-Gear, and everything else.”

She let out a breath.

“Hey.”

He heard her speak.

“Hey, Sayama. If you lost them, could you truly wish the world would become a far, far better place by inheriting everything they had accomplished?”

“——————”

He listened to the words coming from her downturned face.

“You can’t, can you? Sayama Mikoto.”

She let out a breath.

“Are you prepared to say they died because they were hopeless, that their efforts were misguided, and that they should thank us because we will not turn out like they did? Are you prepared to step over them like that? …All you do is say *it will all be over if we demonstrate our understanding*!!”

She placed a hand on her chest.

“But even if you demonstrate your understanding, my parents will protect me! Not you, but me! Are you prepared to kick all of them aside and create a new world even if it means becoming a villain!?”

Sayama could not answer her question. He simply replied to Mikoku’s true feelings.

“Do you…?”

He slowly hit on the real question.

“Do you intend to become the greatest villain of all that tests this world and all other worlds? …Are you using the Leviathan that bears all of the negative and positive concepts to bet on an immortal world where no one needs to be stepped over!?”

She simply hung her head, hid her eyes behind her bangs, and smiled bitterly.

And she spoke.

“Are you coming, my opposite self? A hopeless battle awaits you. And…”

He listened.

“Come kill this detestable person I am, Sayama. Come kill this incompetent person who will only demand you give everything back no matter how much you lecture me. If you do not…you cannot stop me, the world, or anything else!!”

A moment later, her position quickly rose.

The high-altitude wind raged and Sayama’s footing swung downward.

“Toda Mikoku!!”

He shouted up at Mikoku who picked up something precious by the pulpit.

However, she no longer looked his way.

Noah descended from the bell-ringing platform and stood by her side.

“Sayama Mikoto, please tell Alex and Tatsumi that I am no longer doing this for Shino. Tell them I simply wish to change the world even if it means destroying all of you and myself.”

So…

“Tell them this is goodbye.”

●

A roof of armor began to cover Sayama’s footing.

“Kh!”

This would likely become the base of the Leviathan’s wing.

The floor moved toward the angle that could grasp the engine and it spilled Sayama downward.

In an instant, he was thrown out into empty space.

He looked up at Mikoku far above.

“I will defeat you!!”

He spread the fingers of his left hand toward his other self.

“I swear I will defeat you!!”

He fell out from the bottom of Noah.

●

Itaru and Sf were stopped on the staircase leading into darkness.

Sf frowned slightly.

“Communications…have cut off.”

“Noah has placed a stealth barrier around its concept space, using an information concealing concept. Only those inside the concept space can comprehend the existence of anything in there. It’s to the point that we wouldn’t be able to comprehend the existence of any transmissions coming from it.”

“In that case,” said Sf. “Where is Noah going?”

“Where do you think?”

After a pause, she expressionlessly answered Itaru’s question.

“Here.”

“Most likely. Noah will have kept its memories just in case. And that included the location of Low-Gear’s UCAT headquarters.”

He sighed.

“That aerial ship was primarily a peaceful facility, but it was meant to become the greatest stronghold supporting Top-Gear after they subjugated the world. It contains enough firepower to confront every other Gear head-on.”

Hearing that, Sf turned to face him.

“If they had something so powerful, why did they not use it to invade Low-Gear?”

“Didn’t I already tell you? Noah was built to maintain a lasting peace, so Top-Gear’s pride wouldn’t let them send it out to attack. And when Top-Gear was destroyed…the entire world fell to the negative side far too quickly.”

Itaru bent forward and rested his elbow on the railing in a pose of disinterest.

“Noah must be filled with fear at having come to this unknown enemy world. The negative concepts that have combined with it have activated, so it needs to create and activate the positive concepts to suppress the negative ones. And…”

“The concept creation instructions from a Top-Gear resident were stopped.”

“Yes.”

Itaru nodded and reached for his sunglasses.

He removed them and turned his bared eyes toward empty space.

“Noah must think that it is surrounded by enemies. As a ship from Top-Gear, it will want to create the kind of world the residents of Top-Gear would want. That is why it will come here, to the enemy territory found in its memories.”

“Tes.” Sf nodded but frowned just a bit. “Due to the information concealing concept, no one will realize Noah is coming here. Itaru-sama, are you not going to urge the others to evacuate?”

“Why would I need to do something so kind?” he said plainly. “That isn’t my job.”

“Tes.”

Sf nodded and said nothing more about it.

She asked something else instead.

“If Heo-sama and the others pick up Sayama-sama and attack Noah, will they be able to destroy it?”

“Not a chance.” Itaru smiled bitterly. “We had made our predictions before making our attack. If Noah had a combat form, we predicted that no attack or defense would work against it. Of course, Top-Gear was destroyed before they had a chance to use it.”

He was not done speaking.

“But our predictions from back then will be useful now.”

“Useful?”

“Yes, we had predicted where Noah would attack first if Top-Gear did use it to invade Low-Gear.”

He moved his gaze down.

He looked to the darkness below.

He straightened his back and gave the empty space an expressionless look.

“Sf, tell me where this is.”

“Tes. Based on the coordinates, we are at the very bottom level of UCAT. I believe it is the seventh basement.”

“Correct. You have some decent measurement devices in you. And you should know that this seventh basement is far deeper than any of the other floors.”

“Tes.” Sf nodded and cleared her ears. “But according to my acoustic scan, there is a faint echo. I have determined we are near the bottom.”

“That is also correct. So…look down, Sf.”

She looked down from the railing as instructed.

She looked into what had been nothing but empty darkness before.

“I can see a shadow.”

There were shades to the darkness.

It began directly below and continued on and on into the distance.

“What can you see, Sf?”

“Tes. This…appears to be a tower.”

“That’s right,” said Itaru as he lightly raised a hand.

“Ah.”

Sf realized he had placed his hand on her head.

The metal maid narrowed her eyes as he stroked her head, but…

“Itaru-sama, I did nothing worthy of praise. …I have determined that is not what I wanted.”

“It’s fine. You’ll be doing something praiseworthy soon enough.”

He stared into the depths of the darkness and spoke with a sigh in his voice.

“Sf, I am about to give you a request. A very important and…silly-sounding request.”

●

The time was 1:27 AM.

Noah turned eastward at eight kilometers above the Mt. Ikoma region and added an information concealing concept to the concept space to keep anyone else from comprehending its presence.

Noah then used its massive white metal dragon body to slowly move east.

It ascended with heavy but certain speed and created an overwhelming surge of air and clouds.

As it travelled through the sky with a great rumbling, the American UCAT mechanical dragons inside the concept space could not keep up.

However, two things rose from the mountains and into the heavens.

One was a blue and white mechanical dragon that split the sky with a white contrail behind it. The other was a black giant that flew after the mechanical dragon.

They were Thunder Fellow and Susamikado.

The two of them flew high into the moonlit sky and made a nearly right angle turn.

They turned east.

The two of them used their acceleration to challenge the giant Leviathan flying high in the sky.

They would reach it in four minutes’ time.

Chapter 13

“Noah’s Ark”

I made a promise
And I will keep it
Even if I had not made the promise
I would keep it

●

Automaton Noah supported Mikoku in the corridor.

She used her gravitational control to hold Shino's body in the air.

"Mikoku-sama."

The person she spoke to had lost consciousness.

Her condition was due to exhaustion and the hits she had taken from Sayama.

She had been bearing with it, but she had suddenly found herself unable to continue on.

That was why she had lost consciousness.

Noah was already carrying out the instructions Mikoku had given her.

And Noah herself had been given another command.

This command had been given to her long ago by her creator.

"――――"

She recalled the past.

She thought back to so very long ago when she had been surrounded by everything.

●

○ **December 24, 2005**

Noah remembered it. She even remembered the dates.

○ **"Before" December 25, 1986**

In the world named Top-Gear, she had been created for the coming new world. She was meant to protect the world filled with residents of the other Gears once Top-Gear had subjugated those other worlds.

She was an ark that protected the Concept Cores which supported the world and, even if the other Gears opposed them with their own Concept Cores, she could easily subjugate them and protect the people from the spreading flames of war.

She was a boat of salvation equipped with a facility for creating concepts so that she could oppose any and all threats and, more importantly, so she could give the people a life of plenty.

She had been guaranteed all capabilities and had been given every kind of power.

However, she had a single flaw.

For some reason, she had been unable to create concepts in Top-Gear.

Her creator seemed to have realized why.

○ **"Before" September 12, 1988**

In addition to the research and development of the concept creation facility, a plan was underway to increase Noah's knowledge and abilities.

She would learn the knowledge, history, and combat techniques of UCAT and every Gear.

○ **"Before" October 10, 1988**

When mastering the Nagata-style techniques, she met a girl named Tatsumi who was the family's heir.

She sparred with the girl a few times to confirm her skills, but the girl would get oddly angry when Noah held back so as not to injure her.

○ **"Before" December 24, 1988**

Her creator had a child. The child moved back and forth between the two sexes and her name included "life" in its meaning.

A friend of her creator's back in Low-Gear apparently had a child as well.

Two children were born on the night before the celebration of the holy one's birth.

Her creator commented that two holy ones had been born.

○ **December 23, 2005**

Noah remembered another child born that year.

That child was Mikoku.

○ **"Before" July 14, 1989**

Alex brought a crying Tatsumi to see the mechanical dragon takeoff and landing zone.

"What is justice?" Alex asked. "I wonder if I have my own version of it inside me."

○ **"Before" November 3, 1990**

Noah asked her creator a question.

"Am I a failure? Is that why I can't create the concepts? Over."

Both of her creators told her that was not the case.

Based on her statistical analysis if human facial patterns, their expression at the time was a mixture of troubled and joyful.

○ **"Before" November 5, 1990**

Noah became painfully aware that some percentage of her giant body was wasted space.

She often suggested giving up on the concept creation facility and instead building more residential space for people to live. She had suggested building the facility known as a church, just like the one her creator had built.

She liked the ringing of the bell.

Its ring was a fluctuating sort of data that she could not create with her synthetic electronic sounds and it was much louder than other musical instruments.

It was ideal.

It made a unique sound that no one else could emulate and it also carried far into the distance.

○ **"Before" March 25, 1991**

Noah wanted to be *like that*.

However, she had a flaw. Her concept creation facility was theoretically complete, but it would not function properly for some reason.

She had nothing that only she could do.

She had the Concept Cores corresponding to the ten Gears, but the other Gears had those as well.

A great many people could be evacuated into her residential areas and she could act as a final stronghold in an emergency, but she did not want to make use of that power.

○ **“Before” September 18, 1991**

“I want to do something good. Over.”

Noah knew that Top-Gear would invite Low-Gear to Top-Gear once the world’s time of destruction arrived.

Low-Gear contained reservations for the other Gears. At the meeting between Top-Gear and Low-Gear representatives, some had said the Gear reservations needed to be informed of Top-Gear’s existence and a plan to deal with them had to be determined before the time of destruction arrived.

○ **“Before” January 10, 1992**

Low-Gear’s representative agreed to reveal the truth in order to keep the other Gears from joining the concept war between Top-Gear and Low-Gear.

They agreed to do so by three years before the time of destruction which was April of 1996.

○ **“Before” March 10, 1992**

Her creator’s child was apparently being bullied at kindergarten.

Noah could not go outside.

Mikoku had cried because she had not been able to protect Noah’s creator’s child.

Noah had no way to help, but she learned that Mikoku was a kind child.

Mikoku’s parents had made a certain expression. Noah statistically determined it was a slight smile.

○ **“Before” March 20, 1993**

Noah gained a single joy.

The concept creation facility was remade and the negative concepts were to be created.

Low-Gear would reveal Top-Gear’s existence in April of 1996, so it was expected refugees from the other Gears would arrive then. With “stiff” expressions, the higher ups had decided Top-Gear had to prove its superiority by building a place for any Low-Gear residents that arrived.

Noah was overjoyed.

Her creator also made a “stiff” expression, but the creation facility inside Noah was remade and – theoretically – all of the flaws had been dealt with.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1993**

One more thing was added to the creation facility: a bell.

The bell would indicate the completion of the concept creation. It would inform everyone that the world had changed.

This was something only Noah had.

She wanted to try ringing it right away.

This was hers alone. It was the physical proof of something only she could do.

○ **“Before” February 18, 1994**

Noah had a thought.

“Is it still not time for the world? Over.”

Was it still not time for the worlds to gather?

Was it still not time for the world to change?

Helping that along was something only she could do.

Creating, protecting, and supporting the beginning, ending, and everything afterwards was her job.

The great army inside her was to reach out if someone reached their hand into the sky.

The great armor outside her was to protect any precious people trembling in fear.

“Is it still not time for the world? Over.”

○ **“Before” April 18, 1994**

Mikoku and Noah’s creator’s child played a lot with the daughter of the Tamiya family.

Her creator’s child dressed as a boy outside but as a girl inside Noah.

○ **“Before” December 24, 1995**

The ending came suddenly.

Noah did not known exactly what was happening.

Theoretically, her concept creation facility should have been perfect, but for some reason, she lost control of the negative concepts being created and they began to activate.

○ **“Before” December 24, 1995**

It happened in an instant.

In that instant, Top-Gear was flipped toward the negative side.

By the time Noah worked to suppress the negativity by surrounding it in the positive concepts, the number of survivors was only in the triple digits.

The only survivors were those who had been lucky enough to be wearing anti-concept equipment at the time, so they were all scientists, their families, or soldiers in training.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

Noah and the researchers worked to control the negative concepts.

However, those people collapsed and then the enemy arrived. Enemies had arrived from Low-Gear to destroy Noah.

Noah feared those enemies.

She had great power to defend herself or to protect the new world.

However, the people of Low-Gear were also those she was meant to protect. Also, Low-Gear contained the residents of many other Gears, so losing them would be a problem for the people behind them.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

Noah asked her creator a question.

“What am I supposed to do? Over.”

Her creator replied while holding her child.

“Don’t worry.”

She then asked a question.

“Do you remember the song I taught you?”

Noah answered that she did remember. Yes, it remained in her memory.

○ **December 24, 2005**

Noah recalled what her creator had said.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

“You are probably going to be alone, but the time is sure to come when you will become a creator. The time will come when you will know you should change the world.”

Noah could not believe it. Top-Gear was being destroyed, so that was not a possibility she could believe in.

But this woman was one of her creators. It would make sense for her to know things that Noah did not. More importantly, she had been the one to create that church bell and Noah’s intermediary terminal was modeled after her.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

“If you have changed the world, you can sing the song I taught you. That song praises the birth of a holy person, so it’s an appropriate song for the creation of a new world. So…if you ever finish singing that song, please ring the bell. Ring the bell that signals the arrival of a new world.”

“Understood,” replied Noah. “Over,” she added.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

After that, her creators invited in a Low-Gear man and left her.

When her creator left, she spoke so only Noah could hear.

“Take care of the new world.”

Noah agreed to do so.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

The only Top-Gear residents in range of Noah’s scans were her creator and her creator’s child.

Noah determined even her creator had little time left.

The end was coming for the people who had created her.

It would not be surprising if that meant the ending had come for her, their creation, as well.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

Noah was enveloped in light and closed off her consciousness as she felt the end arrive.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

Noah stopped her clock at December 25, 1995 11:59 PM.

○ **December 24, 2005**

The automaton named Noah had records of the time before she had reactivated the day before.

Her main body had been active and experienced that time.

However, time had remained stopped for her herself, so she only needed to add about ten years.

After all, she had yet to fulfill a certain command.

That was something only she could do.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

Her creator spoke to her.

“Take care of the new world.”

○ **December 24, 2005**

Winged Noah’s clock was stopped at December 25, 1995 11:59 PM.

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah recalled what had happened after being dropped into the void.

○ **Unknown**

How much?

○ **Unknown x100000000000^{5}...**

How much time had passed?

○ **Unknown x100000000000^{5}...**

The positive concepts were no longer within Noah.

○ **Unknown x100000000000^{5}...**

The negative concepts had not stopped activating.

○ **Unknown x100000000000^{5}...**

Time passed and more time passed.

○ **Unknown**

At one point, something higher than Noah’s sleeping consciousness activated. Even when greater than 99% of her functionality was asleep, some preservation functions remained active and they attempted to record what her sight devices saw without waking her.

○ **December 25, 210050077 BC**

She saw the sky.

This was not her main consciousness. It was her unsleeping subconscious in her nerve terminals. They left her consciousness to awaken naturally and simply recorded everything that happened.

The earth, sky, and ocean were there.

There were forests, mountains, and winds. The stars and the sun swapped out in the sky as day and night came and went.

○ **December 25, 8331 BC**

Finally, an unnatural change occurred near the inland sea visible in the distance.

People had begun to move.

○ **December 25, 6698 BC**

A village was formed and lots of people were visible.

There were only about one hundred of them, but it was far more than zero.

○ **December 25, 2517 BC**

The village grew larger.

○ **December 25, 1865 BC**

The number of people grew even more once they built boats to catch lots of fish.

Small-scale conflicts broke out from time to time, but it was not enough to produce any deaths.

○ **December 25, 1032 BC**

People started living on the neighboring plains and mountains.

The terminal consciousness on the surface could not access Noah's massive collection of knowledge, so it did not know where this was.

It knew this was some kind of world because there were people, but it did not know what world it was.

○ **"Before" December 25, 1995**

Her creator spoke to her.

"Take care of the new world."

○ **December 25, 1032 BC**

However, Noah's terminal consciousness realized that this was not a new world at all.

It was Low-Gear.

It did not know how this could be Low-Gear.

Regardless, the geography and weather were identical to those in the records, so this had to be that old world.

It did not know why, but this was Low-Gear.

○ **"Before" December 25, 1995**

Her creator spoke to her.

"Take care of the new world."

○ **December 25, 1995**

Noah's creator had told her to make the new world herself.

Noah would not wake until then.

○ **December 25, 58**

Finally, the village disappeared and was remade.

○ **December 25, 423**

Conflict arrived and it was built again.

○ **December 25, 795**

It grew.

○ **December 25, 1018**

Large wooden ships travelled to the city.

○ **December 25, 1241**

The ground was smoothed off, roads were built, and…

"_____"

○ **December 25, 1580**

Noah awoke slightly.

When a castle was built inland, she heard the ringing of a bell.

○ **December 25, 1612**

However, the ringing soon stopped and only Noah's surface continued recording.

She was inside a concept space.

No one came to visit her.

However, her terminal consciousness found a sudden visitor at one point.

○ **December 25, 1911**

It was a one-armed man.

Something remembered *him*.

That something was the terminal consciousness near the elevator bulkhead door toward her stern, which was now her bottom.

That terminal consciousness had once welcomed *him* in.

The small thought circuits of the terminal consciousness did not know what that meant, but her creator had given her instructions long ago.

When *he* arrived on a mechanical dragon, she was to let *him* inside.

And so Noah's terminal consciousness let *him* inside.

It had been a long time since she had last carried out one of her creator's commands.

He looked slightly surprised when she flashed her lights as a greeting.

"Are you welcoming me in? You are…as nice as always."

According to her records, *he* had searched inside her and she had footage of him bowing his head toward a dropped sword.

From there, a small series of events began.

○ **1911+**

He visited a few more times. Her terminal consciousness could open and close the door, but she could not hold a conversation because her consciousness had not woken.

But after a short period of time, he stopped visiting.

○ **December 24, 1983**

However, something strange happened.

The one-armed man visited again, except he had both arms and had grown younger.

Noah's terminal consciousness did not know what to make of it.

Also, something even more incomprehensible happened.

Her creator visited with the formerly one-armed man and she too had grown younger.

Her terminal consciousness welcomed the two of them in.

Her own consciousness had not woken, but the two of them had searched through her and been amazed.

Her internal terminal consciousness had been a bit happy because it felt like they were praising her.

However, they only visited for a short time.

At one point, they stopped visiting, and…

○ **December 24, 1995**

“——————”

All of a sudden, Noah’s consciousness nearly woke.

The negative concepts were throbbing inside her.

She sensed danger.

There were two dangers.

First, she was worried she would be unable to entirely contain the negative concepts if they fully activated.

Second, a full inspection of her external records revealed that she was indeed in Low-Gear and she did not know why.

She was in the Gear that had destroyed Top-Gear.

However, she did not fully wake. After all, this was not the new world.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

Her creator spoke to her.

“Take care of the new world.”

○ **December 24, 1995**

While still not fully awake, Noah worked at analyzing her data.

She read through the massive piles of data, linked it together, and detected similar pieces of information, but she still did not wake.

She still had no one to be her master.

Also, she could not accomplish her goal.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

Her creator spoke to her.

“Take care of the new world.”

She was told to ring her bell.

She had the bell and she wanted to ring it.

But could she create a new world?

○ **“Before” August 10, 1990**

She often played shiritori with her creator. It was meant to increase her vocabulary.

That was where she learned the word “goal”. A “goal” was something to be accomplished and “means” were used to accomplish it. One had a goal because they had the means.

○ **December 24, 1995**

So Noah had a thought.

“I will create a new world.”

Was that the means or the goal?

She did not know.

She did not know because she had no reason.

But when she searched, she found a reason.

○ **“Before” November 5, 1990**

She liked the ringing of the bell.

It made a unique sound that no one else could emulate and it also carried far

into the distance.

○ **“Before” March 25, 1991**

Noah wanted to be *like that*.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1993**

One more thing was added to the creation facility: a bell.

The bell would indicate the completion of the concept creation. It would inform everyone that the world had changed.

This was something only Noah had.

She wanted to try ringing it right away.

This was hers alone. It was the physical proof of something only she could do.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

Her creator spoke to her.

“Take care of the new world.”

She was told to ring her bell.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1993**

She wanted to try ringing it right away.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1993**

She wanted.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1993**

Wanted.

○ **December 24, 1995**

What only she could do became her “goal”.

○ **December 24, 1995**

Her creator’s command became the “means” to accomplish her “goal”.

Her means and her goal were the creation of a new world and the ringing of the bell.

Goal. Goal. Goal. Lilac. Cosmos. Snapdragon. Oh, that ended on an “n”.

She had messed up like that a lot in the past too.

○ **“Before” August 16, 1992**

Noah’s creator rubbed her head.

She asked her creator why she was being praised for losing a game of shiritori.

“You like the names of flowers, don’t you?”

When she agreed, her creator gave her an illustrated encyclopedia of flowers.

She opened it in order to learn the names and not mess up anymore, but she became fascinated by the shapes of the flowers.

○ **“Before” August 19, 1992**

This time, she lost with dandelion.

She was praised regardless.

○ **December 24, 1995**

Noah reconfirmed that her creator’s command was the “means” to accomplish her “goal”.

○ **December 24, 1995**

With her creator gone and Top-Gear, the base of the new world, also gone, that command took top priority.

She had been tasked with creation.

She wanted to create.

But, she thought. *What am I supposed to do?*

But at one point, the world suddenly grew a lot noisier.

○ **October 27, 2003**

The Concept Cores she could sense in this world began to move and demonstrate their power.

It mostly happened to the east, but…

○ **March 29, 2005**

She sensed that power to the west, near what would have been Mount Hyono on Top-Gear's map.

○ **July 24, 2005**

She sensed more of that power near Kurashiki.

○ **March 29, 2005**

Once, a helicopter passed by near her.

○ **May 11, 2005**

Noah thought she might be able to do it.

○ **"Before" December 25, 1993**

She wanted to try ringing it right away.

○ **May 11, 2005**

If someone gathered the positive Concept Cores, they would activate them and send them out of control, but wouldn't that mean releasing the activated concepts and remaking this world?

○ **December 24, 2005**

The result she had hoped for had arrived the night before.

Three survivors of Top-Gear had visited her with all of the positive Concept Cores.

They had not been her creator, but they had been worth listening to.

They had all remembered her and she had remembered them.

Strangely, despite so much time having past, the three of them had only aged by about ten years.

However, it really had been them.

One of them, Mikoku, had asked her to do something.

While holding Tamiya Shino's remains, she had asked Noah to bring the girl back to life.

○ **"Before" December 25, 1995**

Her creator spoke to her.

"Take care of the new world."

She was told to ring her bell.

○ **"Before" December 25, 1993**

She wanted to try ringing it right away.

○ **December 24, 1995**

Noah reconfirmed that her creator's command was the "means" to accomplish her "goal".

○ **December 23, 2005**

I see, thought Noah in front of Mikoku.

Yes, she also thought.

"A new world, you mean? Over."

To bring everything back to life would be to bring her creator and everyone else back to life.

Was this why her creator had tasked her with creation?

Noah agreed and the philosopher's stone creation was sure to go well.

The concept creation facility worked properly and it contained all of the original positive Concept Cores. She could sense that she would be able to create a concept without them activating beyond control.

However…

○ **December 23, 2005**

Someone stopped her "means" and "goal".

They were from Low-Gear's UCAT and they were the children of those who had destroyed Top-Gear long ago.

If she was stopped, she could not return the world to its original form.

If she was stopped, she could not sing her song or ring her bell.

She could have resurrected everything that had been lost, so why was Low-Gear interfering again?

○ **December 23, 2005**

Noah did not like this.

This was what only she could do.

She silently begged them not to stop what her creator had asked her to do.

○ **December 24, 2005**

But she was stopped after all. She was unable to pull the bell's cord.

Fortunately, she had regained accurate data on the positive Concept Cores and she knew that the concept creation facility would work properly.

○ **December 24, 2005**

Currently, Noah was creating the positive Concept Cores inside herself.

Once that was complete, she could combine them with the negative Concept Cores and create the resurrection concept.

She would not let anyone get in her way.

Creation was the task given to her by her creator. Once everything was resurrected, everything she was to protect would return.

Anyone who would get in her way was her creator's enemy and would essentially erase what she was to protect.

○ **December 24, 2005**

So Noah entered combat mode.

She knew who her enemy was: this world's UCAT.

It would be okay.

Everyone would disappear regardless when she created the resurrected world.

She would first destroy the world and secure her safety. If she could then bring everything back to life, she could create a happy world where everyone was equal.

“It will be okay. Over.”

○ **December 24, 2005**

Noah muttered the words her creator had spoken to her.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

Her creator spoke to her.

“Take care of the new world.”

○ **December 24, 2005**

Noah thought about Mikoku.

That girl had solidified her goal for her.

She had been unable to protect that girl in the past, but the girl had still come to rely on her.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

Her creator spoke to her.

“Take care of the new world.”

○ **December 23, 2005**

Mikoku asked her to do something.

While holding Tamiya Shino’s remains, she asked Noah to bring the girl back to life.

○ **December 23, 2005**

Noah replied.

“A new world, you mean? Over.”

○ **December 23, 2005**

It all fit together.

Her goal, her means, her desire, and what she should do all fit together.

The destruction of Top-Gear had split everything apart and made it uncertain, but after so much time had passed, it had been brought together by her creator, herself, and Mikoku.

○ **December 24, 2005**

Noah moved forward.

Mikoku was her current master, her creator’s command lay at the foundation of it all, and she would fulfill her own and Mikoku’s desires.

Mikoku would be able to resurrect the world.

Noah would be able to ring her bell.

○ **December 24, 2005**

Winged Noah’s clock was stopped at December 25, 1995 11:59 PM.

○ **December 24, 2005**

If she rang her bell, would her time begin to move once more?

No, if she changed the world, the world would be utterly remade.

She too would disappear, but…

“I will have *moved* from stopped to ‘disappearing’. Over.”

When that time came, she could ring her bell.

○ **December 24, 2005**

Noah held Mikoku in her arms.

She had made up her mind.

She understood what she should do, so she gave the command to her main body.

Her entire body went through its greatest evolution and all of her armaments and armor were deployed.

She used her greatest speed to reach this world’s UCAT headquarters where her greatest enemy would be.

She would not let them escape.

With her speed, it would take less than half an hour to travel from Osaka to the mountains of Tokyo.

She would destroy them to keep them silent and then bring everyone back to life.

That was what only she could do.

And…

“We can all be together. Over.”

In the new world, they could all gather below the ringing bell.

Her creator, her enemies, and everyone else could all be together.

○ **December 24, 2005**

Noah continued on.

She flew through the night sky to tune the world that was worn down from all it had lost.

She then realized that enemies were fast approaching from behind using the original Concept Cores as weapons.

The enemy is here, she sadly thought.

She would prefer not to lose them if possible, but…

“—————”

They approached.

○ **December 24, 2005**

This was Noah’s first battle after passing through such vast spans of time.

She shifted into combat mode.

○ **December 24, 2005**

Noah spoke while carrying Mikoku and Shino to her bow.

“Awaken, my two servants. The enemy is here.”

○ **December 24, 2005**

Noah changed her main body’s name to what her combat form had been designated when it was designed.

She was now the great dragon that enveloped the entire world and fought to

protect it.

She was the Leviathan.

Chapter 14

“Gulp into the Past”

The reverberating past is not a regret
It is specifically because it is so important
That you feel unworthy of it

●

A giant dragon flew through the sky.

It was a long white dragon.

It was as long as a city, but its body continued to transform and expand.

It had had two wings when taking flight, but a third and fourth had appeared on the bottom near the back end while the base of a fifth and sixth were forming on its back near the center.

Its armor was thick and its accelerators were enormous.

The rumbling transformations of evolution occurred every few hundred meters.

Sturdiness and speed coexisted inside its giant form, so the pursuing mechanical dragons from American UCAT could not keep up. And…

“————”

The great mechanical dragon’s body produced a massive curtain of pressure much like a meteorological phenomenon and it blew away all of those pursuers.

The air several kilometers in front of the great mechanical dragon was shaking as it was pushed forward.

Dark clouds appeared and hid the night sky, they became thunder clouds, and a thick valley of clouds formed on either side of the great white dragon.

The valley of clouds was thick enough to hide the great mechanical dragon and lightning lit up the inside of the valley.

The surging bolts of lightning resembled dragons, they raced out as if to meet the great mechanical dragon, and they swept across its body.

Behind the great dragon, the clouds were whipped about by the area of vacuum created by its size and speed and they produced a true lightning storm.

The great dragon left behind a fan-shaped trail of thunder clouds.

To pursue it, one needed the speed to keep up and the power to overcome the wind pressure and to ignore the thunder clouds.

There were some who could do just that.

In the western sky, two forms cut through the thunder clouds.

They poured on acceleration and tore through the air while being tossed about by the wind.

One was a blue and white mechanical dragon and the other was a four-winged black god of war.

A few people could be seen on the mechanical dragon’s back.

They all wore white armored uniforms.

Once the mechanical dragon broke through the clouds, Harakawa spoke up from the pilot’s seat.

“Make sure to thank us! We got you here!”

●

On top of Thunder Fellow, Kazami pushed through the misty clouds like a

wave and saw something in the air below.

Straight ahead and below was a white expanse of earth bravely soaring through the sky with massive roaring waterfalls of dark clouds on either side.

…What…?

“What is this?”

She saw what looked like an enormous floating island.

It was fifteen kilometers long and facing east. A valley of thunder clouds had formed around it white wings measuring several kilometers long grew from its back.

It was too hazy to see the front end of the dragon fifteen kilometers away.

Even when looking down on it from directly above, it was too large to grasp in its entirety.

They could always move higher, but then they could not attack.

And they could not tell anyone outside the concept space that the great dragon was in flight.

An information concealing concept had been applied to the concept space, so even if Kazami and the others left to tell those on the outside about the Leviathan, they would no longer be able to understand that very information.

This was dangerous because they had no way of informing those at its destination that it was coming.

Its target was Japanese UCAT and Shinjou, Diana, and all of the others were there.

That was why they would have Thunder Fellow fly Sayama to Japanese UCAT. They would be unable to understand any information about the Leviathan due to the information concealing concept, so their last resort was to have Sayama carry out a memo saying “evacuate”.

Kazami did not know if that would work out, but she did have a thought.

…At the very least, we have to get Sayama to Shinjou.

However, the Leviathan was before their eyes now.

“What is this gigantic thing?”

Seeing what looked like a flying island gave her a sudden chill.

She thought it was just the cold air, but her breath caught in her throat.

She just about took a step back, but something supported her from behind.

It was Izumo’s hand.

“Wow, Ch-Chisato, you’re actually pressing my hand against your butt? Is this what you call passive groping!?”

“That’s because you held your hand right there!!”

She hit the bottom of his jaw with the tip of G-Sp2 and the wind carried him away.

“Nwah! W-wait! We’re doing this again!?”

Fine then, Kazami expanded her wings and instantly circled behind him.

He looked surprised as he floated up into the air.

“Oh! You sure are fast!”

“This is normal. You’re just slow.”

She wondered what the best thing to say while saving him was and she swung G-Sp2 to slam him down onto Thunder Fellow’s back.

And then…

“Are you okay, Kaku?”

“The fact that I am after that is making me a little fed up with my life.”

“You two are probably setting a record for high-altitude flirting. Where next, outer space?”

They looked back and saw Sayama looking down from Thunder Fellow’s shoulder.

The bottom of his armored uniform fluttered in the wind as he kneeled down.

“So the Leviathan is not fighting back. Harakawa, is there any sign of an attack?”

“Thunder Fellow’s scans don’t show the cannons moving at all outside from the evolutionary transformations.”

“What does that mean?” asked Kazami.

Hiba answered from Susamikado behind them.

“Probably that it doesn’t see us as a threat.”

They all nodded in understanding as the wind blew.

“Leave it to the loser to get it. He saw right through to the truth.”

“Yeah, that really was the advice of a small fry.”

“I see. So experiencing defeat can enrich a person… Not that it matters to me.”

“Wh-why do you always start critiquing me as a person!?”

Then Mikage asked a question.

“Ryuuji-kun, what is a ‘small fry’?”

“Well, um…”

After a while, Susamikado hung its head and produced Hiba’s emotionless voice.

“Do I really have to answer that myself?”

They all felt some sympathy, but that was when the wind began to tremble.

They heard something like an earthquake from directly ahead.

“The Leviathan is accelerating!”

The massive accelerators on the back end of the Leviathan were producing blue light.

It was picking up speed in search of the enemy it was meant to crush.

Kazami realized anew that the Leviathan did not even see them as an enemy.

…In that case, this acceleration isn’t meant to lose us.

“It’s accelerating because it wants to crush Japanese UCAT, the enemy that destroyed Top-Gear.”

She clicked her tongue into the sky.

She raised her wings in preparation to stop it.

“We can’t let it get there.”

“Then let us do this,” replied Sayama. “I just saw Suruga Bay to the south. We have already passed Shizuoka. At this rate, we will reach Japanese UCAT in less than five minutes.”

Kazami had a thought as she listened to his calm voice.

…That idiot really is holding back.

They had five more minutes.

With that in mind, she rested G-Sp2 on her shoulder.

“Then what we have to do is simple. We’ll separate and attack the Leviathan to hold it here. In the meantime, Thunder Fellow will continue on ahead to Japanese UCAT.”

“But…!”

“You’re the fastest one here, Heo.”

“——————”

Heo was briefly at a loss for words, but…

“Testament.”

As soon as she said that, Thunder Fellow tilted forward.

It was preparing for a race and that signaled Heo had made up her mind.

Ahead, the giant white mechanical dragon was picking up speed and crossing the sky.

Meanwhile, their power was one-tenth of its.

However…

“It may be big, but it isn’t as big as a world. If it’s made of armor and frames, we should be able to break it!”

She held G-Sp2 at the ready.

“This is probably our only chance to attack. If we fail, we’ll lose Japanese UCAT.”

A moment later, Thunder Fellow accelerated toward the giant mechanical dragon’s back.

●

Mikoku awoke within Noah.

Noah noticed and lowered her to the ground.

“Sayama-sama’s group is pursuing us. Over.”

The large corridor’s ceiling displayed the scenery of the sky overhead.

A blue and white mechanical dragon flew through the black sky with a contrail behind it.

“Is that…?”

“Testament. I am currently on course to assault Japanese UCAT. I have determined the mechanical dragon is attempting to arrive ahead of me and to stop me here. Over.”

Mikoku knew their enemy would be using Concept Core weapons and Noah would know that as well.

However, there was no sign of Noah taking any kind of defensive actions.

“Are you sure you do not need to do something? We look completely defenseless and they are not powerless.”

“Not to worry.” Noah passed Shino’s floating form and her blanket to Mikoku. “Let us continue to the bow, Mikoku-sama. There, you can see just how I differ from normal Concept Core weapons. In other words…”

She took a step forward and led the way.

“Please watch and see what result their attacks have against the Leviathan. Over.”

At that very moment, Mikoku sensed brightness in the sky.

It came from the ceiling. The scenery displayed there was filled with light.

“The enemy mechanical dragon has attacked with 5th-Gear’s Concept Core weapon.”

A beam of light struck the Leviathan.

●

A blue and white mechanical dragon raced through the night sky.

It seemed to stretch forward with its great speed as the blue and white line made a power dive skimming just off of the great mechanical dragon’s back.

The blue and white dragon saw the armor, cannons turrets, and shadows of residential areas on the great dragon’s back.

“————!!”

The long cannon mounted on its bottom side suddenly fired and swept across the great white dragon’s back.

It targeted the gap between the armor panels that resembled the trapezius muscles and the muscles along the side of the back.

It fired at a range of about seven kilometers.

The attack swept along like a white sword and reflected light up toward heaven.

The explosion arrived after a short delay.

The cannon with the power to tear into the heavens created a pillar of exploding light seven kilometers long.

The series of geyser-like lights created a wall of explosive light along the great dragon’s back.

There was also noise. Metal parts were smashed and armor panels a dozen meters thick bent.

The great mechanical dragon writhed a bit as if it disliked the noise.

A moment later, a black form flew from the ascending blue and white dragon.

It was a black god of war that had hid in the dragon’s contrail.

The god of war seemed to kick off the air and flipped backwards to turn upside down.

Below it, the great white dragon’s armor passed by.

The black god of war raised both arms down toward that armor.

A giant pile bunker was attached to the right arm and gravitational control

held something in the left hand.

“Guess I’ll give it a shot!!”

A well-built boy raised a large white sword in both arms.

“Let’s show them what we can do.”

That message appeared on the console as the sword produced great light.

The black god of war responded by firing the power gathered inside its pile bunker.

They were both pulverizing blows.

They targeted the groove created by the mechanical dragon’s cannon blast.

First, a two hundred meter sword of light was launched.

“!”

It completed a full swing.

The scraping slash of the light launched massive fragments of metal into the sky.

A moment later, the pile driver fired while making use of their relative speeds.

Its goal was to widen the groove.

The blast of lightning had a diameter of two hundred meters as it slammed into the front of the groove.

“Solidify it!!”

The god of war shouted with a girl’s voice and the lightning blast became a solid object.

Thanks to their relative speed, the god of war’s lightning rapidly tore through the great dragon’s back.

The boy with the sword of light gave a cry when he saw it.

“How do you like our three-blade strategy!? Guaranteed to be the cleanest shave around!!”

At the same time, the black god of war finished tearing through the seven kilometer groove.

The armor on the right of the great dragon’s back was badly bent and shimmering heat rose from it.

However, it was not over yet.

Before the black god of war could fly back up as if making a great leap, something else descended from the heavens.

It only took an instant.

It was a winged girl wearing goggles.

Her and her accelerating spear left the blue and white mechanical dragon’s back and descended through the sky.

With her back to the crescent of the moon, her spear raced down as if to connect one point to the other.

Its target was the torn-open portion of the great mechanical dragon’s right back.

The moonlight revealed the great dragon’s inner structure.

A residential area was exposed and the earth far below was visible through

the gaps torn into the frame, but she did not care.

“Output: 62%! Ragnarok open. …Attacking now.”

A dragon made of light was born in the heavens. It was only a neck and head and a power measuring several kilometers in diameter burst from its gaping maw.

“…!!”

It pierced into the great white mechanical dragon.

It broke through.

●

The sound of a great impact shook the air.

Light scattered and the strength of the impact created a massive luminescence.

The great white dragon shined in the light and revealed its form to the night sky.

At the same time, a great pressure struck it.

A shockwave assaulted it from the center of a blow.

This was a physical blow.

The white armor panels bent from that blow on the inside and the largest piece of composite armor on the right of its belly – measuring several hundred meters across – was removed as if floating away. The release of the attachments created a deep metallic sound. After one such sound, the giant armor panel slowly fell toward the earth.

The right belly was exposed.

This revealed both a skeletal metal framework measuring in the hundreds of meters and other pieces of its structure.

A great hole had been torn open from the right side of the back to the chest and several pillars of electrical discharge appeared within it.

However, most of the shockwave was only reflected along the inner surface of the armor panels.

The pressurized air created an explosion which struck it on the inside.

This produced a bursting of power inside the great mechanical dragon.

The top right half of its body bent and it hopped up from just below the chest.

The sound was not a powerful roar.

Countless intense noises and sounds of collision joined to create what could only be described as a bizarre noise.

“…!!”

The great mechanical dragon tilted forward.

The wings on its back stood tall as if bearing with something.

Also, its speed dropped.

The wind shook and large-scale explosions of water vapor occurred in front of and behind the great dragon as it seemed to curl up.

The air could be heard splitting apart as the great dragon’s deceleration

caused it to collide with a wall of air.

The large components inside the great dragon could be heard breaking.

Overpowered electrical discharges raced along the great dragon's entire body.

Several sets of eyes watched it all happen.

They belonged to the winged girl descending to the ground below, the black god of war left behind by the great mechanical dragon, and the boy standing in its hand.

They all clenched their teeth.

"That wasn't enough to finish it off!?"

After that comment, they looked to the eastern sky.

A blue and white mechanical dragon flew out ahead of the larger balled-up dragon.

"They can make it," someone muttered. "That didn't finish off the Leviathan, but it still stopped it."

So…

"Hurry!"

They begged it to hurry and tell those below the eastern sky that the Leviathan was coming.

But…

"No!" shouted the girl combined with the black god of war.

Everyone looked back in surprise and saw the black machine spreading its wings.

"M-Mikage-san!? Keravnos isn't ready to fire again yet!"

"That wasn't enough! We didn't hurt the Leviathan!" shouted Mikage inside the god of war. "It only prioritized the remaking of its evolution and stripped itself of its old pieces!! So it isn't curling up because we hurt it!"

Everyone watched as something fell from the white Leviathan's body.

Those components were far too large to call components.

The armor panels were at least ten meters long and the actuators were easily thirty meters in length.

Something jutted out from below as if to safely envelop the residential area within.

"New armor…"

This armor was meant to fight, not to protect.

Normally, it would take a major overhaul to replace them all, but the Leviathan could hasten replacements when it took damage and it could fit them into place on its own.

Everything that fell from the Leviathan was slammed backwards when it took flight again.

The Leviathan evolved while seeming to come apart and break apart in midair.

Six newly completed wings swung up on its back.

Massive accelerators were visible at the base of the wings.

“_____”

It only took an instant.

In that instant, the Leviathan launched itself forward.

Its bent body flew forward like an arrow from a bow and the wings lifted as if enduring pain seemed to shatter the sky.

Everything seemed to burst.

The explosion in the sky made a blast of wind look calm and it was enough to knock the black god of war and the winged girl away.

The great white mechanical dragon scattered its components as it traveled east.

Its evolution had increased its speed several times over, so it pursued the blue and white mechanical dragon out ahead.

“…!”

And it easily passed it.

●

Sayama saw the head of the great white dragon forcibly pass by below.

He saw three figures on top of it.

Mikoku held Shino and Noah stood by her side.

Noah spoke.

“We are not your comrades, Mikoku-sama.”

She continued.

“We would be delighted to be used up as your power, your weapons, and your armor. Over.”

She was speaking to Mikoku.

The girl in a black armored uniform had a look of exhaustion on her face as she held Shino in a blanket.

“_____”

She distinctly looked up at Sayama and gave a weak smile with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

Her eyes and his definitely met.

“Wait!”

He shouted down at her while realizing he had shouted this at her before.

And what had happened then?

“Wait, Toda Mikoku!!”

But just as before, she did not wait.

As if to demonstrate that she was the opposite of his desire for her to wait, she shook her head.

“Sorry.”

He could read the movements of the lips on her lowered head.

A moment later, her lips said more.

“Who is willing to be broken as my sword?”

Noah spoke behind her.

“Each of us is your speaking sword. Over.”

“Then,” said Mikoku’s lips. “Who is willing to be broken as my shield?”

“Each of us is your speaking shield. Over.”

“Do you feel no hesitation?”

“Each of us is your speaking doll. Over.”

“Then.” Mikoku opened her mouth. “I will become the emotion needed to swing that sword and shield.”

As soon as she raised her voice, Sayama saw something.

A large, pure white form appeared in the space between him and Noah.

It was a mechanical dragon.

Harakawa was the first to react.

“Is that Alex!?”

It looked like him, but it was not. It was white to the point of being colorless and it had six wings.

“That is my personal craft of the Seraph-class mechanical dragons. Please call it Seraph No. 0. Over.”

The mechanical dragon spoke with the same voice as Noah.

“Alex-sama’s dragon was brought to Low-Gear in the prototype phase and completed there. Seraph No. 0 was also in the prototype phase and completed inside of me. Over.”

With those words, Seraph No. 0 raised its wings.

They contained six large accelerators.

Its acceleration was best described as violent.

It shot forward as if to circle in front of the advancing Leviathan and its shockwave knocked Thunder Fellow out of the way.

The blue mechanical dragon was sent hurtling through the mountainous region’s sky.

●

Kazami saw the pure white mechanical dragon knock Thunder Fellow out of the way and pursue the Leviathan.

“That’s ridiculous!!”

Kazami brought G-Sp2 to its third form.

The divine lance was a collection of powerful acceleration.

At its max speed, she thought she might just outdo Thunder Fellow and catch up, so she pulled her goggles back down.

However…

“——————!?”

A pure white god of war suddenly appeared in front of her.

…Typhon!?”

No, it only had two wings.

However, its sudden appearance had been accomplished the great

acceleration provided by just those two wings.

"…!"

All Kazami was able to see were the words "Lords No. 0" written on its shoulder as the only patch of non-white, a knife-like blade raised high, and flames spewing out.

…Oh, no!

She had been caught off guard and G-Sp2 was still in the process of transforming to its third form.

She could not attack.

However, someone cut in.

It was a black god of war.

Susamikado charged in like the blowing wind and threw a counter with its right fist.

It was willing to destroy its own fist in the attack.

The blow should have landed in an instant, but Kazami saw something else.

The pure white god of war raised its left hand and easily caught Susamikado's right fist.

The pure white god of war dropped the other god of war's speed to zero.

"Wha-…?"

The surprised voice was Mikage's.

However, the enemy continued to move. It raised its two wings and looked into the sky.

"This is as far as you will go. Over."

It spoke with a female voice and it vanished.

It simply seemed to disappear all of a sudden, but Kazami realized what had happened about three seconds afterwards.

High in the sky, a white contrail flew to the east.

The enemy had no intention of fighting. It had stopped them from pursuing the Leviathan, but it had enough speed to catch up. It had to be calmly flying through the sky at the moment.

…That thing's mocking us…

Kazami clenched her teeth.

Susamikado sat there in a daze and Izumo scratched his head from its left hand.

"Was that Noah's defender?"

"Yes." Kazami ground her teeth and forced her mouth open. "That's the last power left to Top-Gear! It's a weapon meant to control and wield the concepts of all ten Gears. Gods of war, mechanical dragons, automatons, and even the Leviathan are now no different from any old knife!"

Kazami shouted out while spreading her wings and looked to the eastern sky.

"We have to continue pursuit! Japanese UCAT is in trouble!!"

●

The Leviathan moved swiftly.

After flying over the mountains of Yamanashi and reaching Okutama, the great dragon bent its body to slow down.

It bent over and seemed to be peering down at the earth.

It turned.

Noah's calculations said it would take thirty-two seconds. The actuators and blocks dividing up its body kept the momentum of its turn to a minimum.

Its right half was still not working perfectly, but the evolution and repair abilities given to it were beginning to provide it with even better components. It had a plentiful supply of materials for creating the armor panels, so it could always maintain its optimal form.

Also, Noah had been given something wonderful by Mikoku, who could be seen as her captain.

She had the foundational data for a high-speed regeneration concept.

This was the closest thing to an immortality concept that Top-Gear had created.

Combining it with the evolution filled Noah with joy.

She could be reunited and joined with something inherited from Top-Gear.

So she spoke while turning the Leviathan to point downwards.

"Mikoku-sama."

She felt this was only natural.

"I will become your weapon."

Mikoku had given her power and a mission.

This mission was much like her own desire, so she did not hesitate.

"Please use us as the weapon meant to bring happiness to the world. Make full use of us like a disposable paper cup with no will of its own. Over."

As the first step, she would temporarily eliminate what stood in their way without understanding the meaning of the happiness she would bring.

Do not worry.

We will meet again, she thought as the Leviathan finished turning.

It now stood vertically.

This position prioritized the power pathways from the reactor in its belly to the main cannon in its mouth.

It was at a certain point in the mountains of Okutama west of Tokyo.

The runway of Japanese UCAT was located below.

A concept space root stretched underground through the Japanese UCAT facility, so only a blast from above could destroy it.

The power of the main cannon would be sufficient.

Seraph No. 0 and Lords No. 0 returned to the hangar on the top of the Leviathan, so Noah prepared to fire.

But then she noticed two things.

First, some pursuers were quickly arriving from the western sky.

The second concerned the runway directly below.

…It's splitting apart?

The asphalt split in two and revealed what lay below: darkness.

The abyss there was very different from the sky above.

It contained a darkness different from the bluish one of the night.

Standing on the Leviathan's forehead, Mikoku yelled just what appeared in the darkness below the three thousand meter runway.

"A cannon!!"

Noah listened to her.

"Did Japanese UCAT prepare this anti-Noah weapon ten years ago!?"

●

In the depths of the darkness, a room was embedded in the wall.

The room was located next to a staircase continuing up into the dark sky, the placard next to it said "Control Room", and its lights were on.

The white room contained a console as well as…

"A coffeemaker and an ashtray? Who decorated this place?"

That comment came from the gray-haired man sitting at the console.

Itaru crossed his legs and looked to the coffee cup placed in front of him.

Steam rose from the black liquid in the cup, but he did not touch it.

"What a pain," he vaguely muttered while looking through the control room's window.

There was a metal wall there.

"Good thing I got it up in time. This anti-Noah super cannon is three kilometers long and it was hidden below the runway, taking up the entirety of Japanese UCAT's seventh basement. It's called the Babel Hammer."

He glanced over at the wire frame representation of the Babel Hammer on the console.

The green lines in the black space formed a cannon that resembled an extremely tall tower.

"After reverse-sealing Noah ten years ago and realizing Top-Gear never had any intention of invading, we sealed it away as if hiding our sins."

The coiling in each section of the Babel Hammer was confirmed on the console and the console gave the signal indicating the cannon was in position.

Multiple displays appeared to explain the Babel Hammer's abilities.

It contained only a single bullet given piercing and impact concepts.

Only an attack from directly overhead could destroy Japanese UCAT, but that meant this weapon only had to fire straight up.

"Compared to Noah, it's a much simpler and more barbaric weapon. …We can't exactly complain if Top-Gear says we aren't on their level, can we?"

Itaru placed his right hand on the console's gear.

He used his left hand to turn the firing lock key and to press the release button.

A targeting image appeared on one of the console's monitors.

A great dragon could be seen with the moon in the background.
“Long time no see.”
With those words, he prepared to pull back on the gear.
But in that moment, his body began to tremble and he doubled over.
“Kah!”
What was contained inside him spewed from his mouth.
“…!?”
He saw the color red before his eyes.
He saw something like a broken mass inside it.
“All of a sudden…hm?”
The recoil slammed him into the chair back and he collapsed limply toward the console.
With nothing to support him, he fell flat onto the console.
A liquid poured from his entire body, but it was not sweat.
As the flowing blood covered the console and dripped down to the ground, it dyed even his gray hair a dark red.
Blood spilled from his mouth instead of air.
At the same time, a warning appeared on the console.
In the sky above, the target was preparing to attack.
White light gathered in the main cannon located in the great white dragon’s mouth.
Itaru, bearer of the cannon, remained silent.
“…”
He had no strength.
His thoughts had almost entirely cut out.
Almost all flesh and blood had been worn away from his body, but…
“———————”
He unsteadily stood up.
His eyes were unfocused, but he spoke someone’s name under his breath.
It was a woman’s name.
His lips continued to move as his eyes stared off into the distance.
“My name…is Ooshiro…Itaru…”
Blood filled his voice.
“I was glad to be…on the same team as you upperclassmen…”
He weakly placed a hand on the console’s gear and reached his other hand to the coffee cup on the console.
He raised the cup.
“Thank you very much.”
He brought it to his mouth and took a gulp.
It had both color and flavor. He swallowed the hot, black liquid.
In that instant, strength returned to his gaze and he looked to the cup in surprise.
“———————”

He closed his eyes.

“Grind the beans better, Sf. Aren’t you supposed to be German?”

With those words, his expression changed.

It was not a look of anger or tears.

He then collapsed onto the console.

The forward motion of his collapse pushed the gear backwards.

Itaru fell forward as if diving into his own color.

●

As Thunder Fellow flew in quick pursuit through the western sky, they spotted the enemy.

It stood up from the world like a spear or sword connecting the heavens and the earth.

“The Leviathan!”

They were thirteen kilometers away.

Thunder Fellow knew it was too soon to fire, but Heo noticed that the Leviathan’s main cannon was glowing in preparation and Sayama spoke from the top of the mechanical dragon.

He shouted a single name.

“Shinjou-kun!!”

This was their limit, so Heo fired.

The Vesper Cannon was set to primarily provide an impact.

It would spread out quite a bit over the thirteen kilometers, but a piercing attack would not alter the Leviathan’s trajectory.

However, it was too late.

The Leviathan fired sooner than anticipated.

It did so while twisting toward the eastern sky as if avoiding something.

A moment later, two lights connected the heavens and the earth.

The beam of light fired from the earth entered the Leviathan’s right side and left its waist.

At the same time, the beam of light fired from the heavens blasted a large hole in the earth.

Then the Vesper Cannon’s blast struck the Leviathan on the side.

The Leviathan’s right half was blown away, but another major explosion occurred.

Within a ten kilometer radius, the mountains of Okutama exploded down to a maximum depth of four kilometers.

The ground was destroyed from below and struck the entire surface of the sky.

“Shinjou-kun!!”

Sayama’s yell was drowned out by everything accompanying the destruction.

●

The remote earthquake in western Kantou had a hypocenter only four kilometers deep and the surface received damage as high as 6-Lower on the Shindo scale.

However, the earthquake did not spread beyond a radius of about a dozen kilometers and the neighboring regions and cities only experienced shaking at 2 on the Shindo scale.

As it was late at night, most of the people living in eastern Okutama were asleep. Nearer to the epicenter, some household belongings collapsed, but no entire homes were destroyed.

But in the mountains nearer the epicenter, there were large-scale landslides, all of the roads through Okutama’s mountains were rendered unpassable, and IAI and its cargo runway were entirely buried below the collapsing valley.

UCAT was erased below the dirt.

Most of those woken by the earthquake heard a few strange facts in the form of sounds.

First, a great rumbling in the sky moved eastward as if writhing.

Second, a few smaller reverberations fell to the southwest.

However, that was all they heard.

They all heard it, but none of them saw what had caused it.

They did not see what had been lost or what had been blasted into the sky on either side.

All that remained was the chilly night sky.

Only that empty sky filled with piercing cold.

Chapter 15

“Although You Are Not Here”

You are here
You are not here

●

In the depths of the night, a quiet electronic tone rang thrice.

It came from below a large wooden gate.

The gate was located in the center of a fence surrounding a lit home, a woman sat on the curb below the gate, and her wristwatch was beeping.

It was Ryouko.

The quiet beeping of her watch was not enough for the eyes behind her glasses to look down.

She stared up into the dark night sky and let out a white breath.

“Will I be able to end this for myself in another hour?” she muttered. “How should I put it?”

She reached for the paper cup of coffee sitting on the curb next to her.

The coffee had already gone cold and the hand holding it had gone pale, but she still brought it to her mouth.

“Feelings tend to fade with time, but they don’t go away. If you try to create a dividing line with time, things tend not to go well next time.”

As she spoke, the gate opened and a young man in a suit sat to her right.

She turned toward him.

“Kouji.” She glared at him. “Why were you off doing your job and ignoring your sister?”

“You were the one that told me to leave this to you!”

“Yes.” She frowned. “You just don’t understand how girls try to show off. … What would you do if a girl told you to leave things to her in front of several hundred enemies!?”

“I would check her past records, her odds of victory, and her catch phrase to see whether I could leave it to her or not.”

“Wow, that sounded like something a smart person would say! …Become stupid!!”

“It doesn’t really matter, but calm down, sister.”

Ryouko flailed her arms around.

“No, no!! I don’t wanna calm down!!”

“What kind of tantrum is that!?”

“More importantly, what brings you to your sister’s sanctuary?”

“Your sanctuary? This is our front gate.”

“Obviously, everywhere I am automatically becomes a holy site! You really don’t get the elder sister genre, do you!? Is that something pedophiles can’t understand!? Is it!? Daughter of the Takahashi family two houses over! Our Kouji is only interested in girls fourteen or younger, so you’re three years too late!!”

Kouji responded while hearing breaking plates and glass coming from two houses over.

“Please stop spreading nonsense about me! Since when am I a pedophile!?”

“Eh? Y-you actually want me to tell you? Oh, no. My brother really hasn’t noticed!”

Ryouko turned to Pes who had walked over.

“Right, Pes? Everyone knows that, don’t they? If you agree, then sit. …Sit! See, he sat! Even a dog can tell you’re a pedophile! It’s standard knowledge even in the Animal Prefecture recently added to Japan’s forty-three prefectures!!”

“I’m going to completely ignore that second half, but you clearly commanded him to sit!”

“Wh-what are you talking about? All I did was say ‘sit’! That wasn’t a command!”

Kouji sighed.

He faced Pes and spoke in an entirely normal tone of voice to get Pes to stand back up.

“Good boy.”

He waited a few seconds, but Pes would not stand up.

After a few more motionless seconds, Ryouko gave a sudden cheer.

“Yayyy! I win! The animal compassion trial has found you guilty of pedophile justice (fourteen years of hard labor)!”

Kouji grabbed Ryouko’s hand.

“Ah.”

She opened her hand without meaning to and some small reddish-brown objects fell from it.

Pes scooped the few pieces from the ground with his tongue and ate them.

“Sister,” said Kouji. “What kind of woman hides dog food in her clothes in the off chance that she can eventually use it to harass her brother!?”

“This kind right here. …D-don’t tell me you’re denying reality and seeing something completely different!?”

“I will admit there are times when I imagine an ideal sister and find my head drooping.”

“Wow! So imagining me makes you lean forward to hide your body’s reaction!?”

Ryouko blushed and pointed at Kouji with both hands.

“Honestly. If I ignore my feelings, that makes me blush! But if I let my feelings in…y-you scum! Stop relying on your sister for everything!”

“It’s kind of amazing how easily you assume you’re the same as someone else’s ideal.”

Kouji sighed and looked up into the sky.

“Where’s Shino-san?”

“Hm? She isn’t back yet. There was an earthquake earlier, so maybe the trains have stopped.”

The last train of the night had long since passed.

They both knew that, but they discussed it regardless.

“Shino-san promised to buy us drinks…”

“Here.”

Ryouko pulled two drink cans from her pocket.

Kouji took them and looked at Ryouko who refused to look him in the eye.

She continued to look a little higher than straight ahead.

“I got these from Shi-chan. She told me you had taken good care of her. She said you lose a lot of points for being a pedophile, but that there are good hospitals for that so you need to work hard and reform your ways.”

“I’ll ignore that, but I asked her to buy three drinks.”

Ryouko paused before answering her brother.

“I drank the third one, of course. That one was yours.”

“I see.” Kouji stood up. “So Shino-san stopped by?”

“That’s right.”

“Then why are you still here?”

“I was seeing her off. And that’s gone into extra innings. We’re tied at the top of the eighteenth and I’m trying to keep pitching for the entire game,” she said. “More importantly, has the young master called? It seems like things are a huge mess over in Okutama.”

“He should be at school today and he’ll call if something happens. He wouldn’t die so easily.”

“You sure are carefree.” Ryouko smiled bitterly. “Well, I guess not.”

“I’m just not as serious as you.”

“Sure, sure.”

She rested her head on her hand.

At the same time, a sudden sound came from the sky.

The rumbling immediately moved from the northwest and vanished into the south.

“What was that?” asked Kouji. “It sounded really low to the ground.”

“A bigger one and a much, much bigger one flew by earlier.”

Ryouko let out a white breath and looked up into the black sky.

“Today’s been weird.”

She almost seemed to be reciting the words.

“I hope nothing happens to the young master and Setsu-chan.”

●

The Aki River ran east to west through southern Akigawa and a residential area was located along a series of windy mountains and forests.

The residential area was built on the northern slope of a mountain.

One of the houses there said “Kazami” out front.

It was a two-story house and there was no car in the garage. The nearby houses were all asleep.

That seemed to be why two people were breaking into the empty Kazami house.

The suspicious pair wore white clothes, the girl stood on the second story balcony, and the boy stood in front of the main entrance.

The suspicious girl commented on the fact that the balcony window had been carelessly left unlocked.

“I wouldn’t expect any less of me. I thought this might happen, so I forgot to lock up”

“If you want to take credit, don’t say you ‘forgot’, Chisato. Besides, you could get up that high with one quick hop using X-Wi.”

“The light would wake up the neighbors. And we’re wearing white, so we’d stand out, Kaku.”

“You’re realistic about the weirdest things.” Izumo sighed. “Wouldn’t it have been easier to head back to the dorm? We wouldn’t even have needed Susamikado to take us here from Okutama.”

“Hm… It’s true waiting in the dorm would be better than getting in everyone’s way as they work to recover in Okutama.” Kazami scratched her head. “But I feel like being at the dorm would bring its own difficulties.”

Down below, Izumo said nothing and Kazami knew he was urging her to continue.

“I mean, if we head back to school, we’d find the schoolyard where Shinjou was hurt and Sayama would be there. I’d feel like we should do something for him or speak with him. I’d just feel like I had to think about too much when it only just happened today…or yesterday I guess.”

Not even twelve hours had passed since Shinjou had been injured.

More and more horrible information had been pouring in for a while and she brought up the worst of them all.

“So Japanese UCAT is gone?”

The location of Japanese UCAT and IAI in the mountains of Okutama had collapsed and work was apparently underway to clear the roads.

Even now, they could hear the distant sounds of helicopters in the air and vehicles on the roads.

It had all been caused by the Leviathan’s main cannon blast.

And…

…We can’t contact the people who were inside Japanese UCAT.

Japanese UCAT had been destroyed, so that was hardly surprising.

Due to the Leviathan’s information concealing concept, the people inside would not have realized it was approaching.

It was obvious what that meant.

The people in that underground space had been annihilated. Not even a trace of them would remain.

And they had no way of confirming it since they had vanished like that.

“It’s all because we didn’t make it in time.”

“Don’t let all that simmer in your mind too much.”

She nodded at the voice from below, but she could not help but imagine it.

Sibyl, Ooki-sensei, Diana, Harakawa's mother, and Director Tsukuyomi would all have been there. Ooshiro Itaru and Sf would have as well and there would have been plenty of kind and courageous people whose names she did not know.

"And Shinjou…"

Kazami had heard Sayama's roar reverberate into the heavens when Shinjou had been injured.

Returning to the dorm had been Sayama's only option.

What would he do once he realized no one was there?

What would he do once he realized he had not avoided losing her even after she was saved from the life-carving concept?

"——————"

Kazami shook her head.

She knew her thoughts had turned in an odd direction.

She was no different. She had lost something and so had everyone else.

But to her, the day's entire incident seemed to have begun with Sayama's roar.

…I've grown a little unsure what exactly it means to feel sorrow.

Should she let out a roar of her own, should she bear with it, or should she simply try to understand it?

She was not sure, so she decided to calm down as Izumo had suggested.

She opened the window in front of her.

"I'm home."

She gave her pointless greeting and for some reason crouched low and removed her shoes before entering.

The room was dark, but it was her room. Izumo had never actually been inside it.

There was a simple reason for that.

"It's full of things from before I met him."

She looked around the dark room, but she relied on her memory more than her sight.

The room was mostly built around the stereo system she had had her father buy her when she entered middle school and the bed she had chosen during elementary school.

She had left the stereo system and bed behind when going off to high school because she had only brought what would fit in her bag and because a strange sense of independence told her she needed to grow up.

She had ultimately transported quite a lot by repeatedly bringing more over in her bag and Izumo had added even more, so things were less clear cut now.

Regardless, this was her foundation, so if she did not find it embarrassing, she felt that meant she had not changed.

"Hey, it's cold out here!"

"Oh, sorry, sorry."

She left her room and passed through the small living room on the left to

reach the stairway landing. Her father's study was on the other side.

She switched on the stairway light.

…Even if the neighbors notice, they won't suspect anything if I head out and greet them.

She walked over to the entranceway and opened the door. She put on a smile and faced Izumo on the other side of the door.

"Welcome home."

She added in a flirtatious tone.

"What will it be first? Dinner? A bath? Or…"

Once she got that far, Izumo gave her a beaming smile, and…

"Right in the entranceway!?"

That was rushing things too much, so she attacked with her right fist.

●

Someone stood in the schoolyard at night.

It was Sayama in his white armored uniform.

The schoolyard was too large to see the other side and the concept space had already been removed.

It was now a normal space containing only the remnants of the year-end festival.

There was a wooden tower in the center and empty festival stands along the edges.

There was no sign of students or anyone else.

…There are no lights on in the school buildings.

Everyone must have been worn out from the winter Bon festival the night before, so they had all naturally dispersed to return to their resting places.

Sayama looked up into the sky.

He saw a single white contrail leading eastward toward Fussa.

That was the path along which Thunder Fellow had flown.

After taking a look at Okutama, Heo and Harakawa had dropped Sayama off at the school and then left for Yokota.

After dropping him off, Harakawa had told him to get some sleep.

A good decision, thought Sayama He had not slept for a while, and…

"Shinjou…"

He knew exactly what had happened. Japanese UCAT had been destroyed and everyone inside was gone.

He had seen the Leviathan's attack with his own eyes.

American UCAT and the other nearby Japanese branches of UCAT had rushed over, but they were mostly making emergency repairs to and checking on the road and crust. It was not yet possible to check for survivors.

It was obvious that Japanese UCAT was lost and there was nothing Sayama and the others could actually do.

Fortunately, UCAT Director Ooshiro had escaped the destruction because he

had gone with the others to the battle.

…He has the luck of a cockroach.

However, that had meant he could immediately contact them with instructions and to explain the situation.

He had given them a simple task after telling them he would contact them next in the morning.

“We are supposed to force ourselves to get some sleep without needlessly visiting the site of the attack.”

Otherwise, they could not put their emotions in order and they could not accept the truth.

And they would not be able to fight.

Yes, fight.

A battle still awaited them.

The Leviathan remained in the sky above Shinjuku, near the center of Tokyo.

The Leviathan had taken a direct hit from the great cannon hidden on the lowest level of Japanese UCAT, but it had not been destroyed.

It had taken such a powerful attack, but it was working to fully heal that injury.

It remained inside a Concept Space. The wide-range concept space production device in the Kanda Laboratory had forcibly grasped the one destroyed by the Leviathan’s attack and guided it into the sky above Shinjuku Station.

The massive concept space covered the eastern half of Tokyo.

The Kanda Laboratory’s personnel had been evacuated and eight duplicate devices were being used to trap the Leviathan.

The reports said it was not moving. It was imprisoned in the concept space, but it was rapidly healing its wounds. It possessed the power of all negative concepts, so it had more than enough power to escape if it wanted to.

Regardless, it remained curled up in the sky above Tokyo and it continued to evolve.

It did not try to move and Sayama knew why.

…It knows no one here can hope to oppose it.

And…

…It’s more focused on changing the world than on some puny enemy.

The Leviathan was creating the positive concepts corresponding to the negative concepts.

Once that was complete, it would create a concept to make the world immortal and it would self-destruct.

That powerful dragon would stay where it was and accomplish what it wished to do.

It had easily evolved and recovered from attacks made by Concept Core weapons. Next time, its defenses would be powerful enough to endure a direct hit from G-Sp2’s divine dragon and the Vesper Cannon.

Its speed would surpass all else and its attacks would pierce through anything.

It was a massive weapon worthy of changing the world.

That was the enemy they had to fight.

That was the enemy they had to prepare for.

And that was why Ooshiro had told them to get some sleep.

Harakawa had told him to do the same thing.

“But…will I be able to sleep?”

Sayama looked to the school building.

“When I wake up, won’t the destruction of Japanese UCAT be confirmed and won’t I be forced to accept everything that has happened? …I am still not ready for that.”

He took a breath.

“I am not ready to accept that nothing remains of Shinjou-kun.”

He faced forward. As he walked toward the school building, he turned his gaze to his surroundings.

“Ahh,” he muttered. “Someone…”

His voice was swept away by the wind.

“Isn’t someone still having a festival? Can’t someone distract me?”

He continued walking through the abandoned field.

“It hurts.”

He squeezed out his voice and held his chest with his right hand.

“It hurts knowing you are nowhere to be found, Shinjou-kun.”

●

A festival was underway below the night sky.

A giant form floated three thousand meters above Shinjuku Station.

It curled up as if asleep and looked down on the festival below.

The festival was the night scenery of the city.

It was early morning on Christmas Eve. Lights filled the city around the station. The roundabout and arcade were decorated with a tree and lights.

Winter break had begun for the students and not many people were visible on the streets, but a lot of the homes had lights on in their windows and a lot of people were still visible in the windows of family-oriented restaurants.

However, all of the people were only pale, transparent blue shadows.

They were only shadows of the outside world visible in the concept space.

The form looking down on them was a fifteen kilometer dragon.

Its body would stretch from Shinjuku to Mitaka, but it was curled up in a space of five kilometers by five kilometers.

Its six wings were wrapped around itself and two people stood on its lowered head.

These people were more than shadows.

One was a girl wearing a black armored uniform and the other was an automaton with twelve pure white wings.

The automaton pointed to the southeast.

“Mikoku-sama, what are those lights? Over.”

Mikoku looked to the light in the distance.

“That is…Tokyo Tower. You should know that. You have a map in your head.”

“This is my first time seeing Low-Gear’s Tokyo. Over.”

“I am not all that familiar with Low-Gear’s scenery either.”

“It is pretty. Over.”

“Yes,” agreed Mikoku.

She sat on the Leviathan’s head, lightly tapped its armor with her palm, and looked to Noah.

“Are you sure you want to do this? …If you create a world, you will disappear, too. You, me, and this world will disappear and then be brought back to life.”

“But I have only one joy. Over.”

Noah spoke as Mikoku watched.

“The new world is my only desire. Over.”

“I see.”

Mikoku nodded and lowered her gaze.

A glass cage had formed on the Leviathan’s head.

“The ejection point for the concept extraction…”

The Leviathan had been made new through evolution. Just like its main cannon, this device used all of the channels in its body to focus its power on a single point.

A girl was inside the cage.

She wore white clothing and floated within dark blue light.

“Shino-sama,” said Noah. “She will be the first brought back to life. So…”

Noah searched for the right words.

“Do not worry, Mikoku-sama. Over.”

“Right.”

Mikoku nodded and looked down at the brightly-lit false city. It was filled with the lights of a festival.

“You will finish creating the positive concepts tomorrow, on the twenty-fifth. All we can do is wait until then for the new world.”

“Is waiting that much trouble? Over.”

“I will be fine. I can distract myself by watching the festival.”

“Really?” asked Noah without forgetting to add “over”.

After a moment, she gave a hesitating suggestion.

“Would you like to play shiritori? Over.”

“Shiritori? …Oh, we did used to play that, didn’t we? You still want to do that?”

“Testament,” replied Noah. “My creator taught me that game. Over.”

Noah spoke quietly to Mikoku.

“Everyone was so kind. Over.”

●

Sayama was in the dark Kinugasa Library.

He had considered returning to the dorm, but his feet had taken him to the library as he passed the school building.

He had somewhat set the dorm as his final destination.

That was where he had the most memories.

If he went there right away, he felt like he would be crushed under the weight of those memories.

He had decided to ease himself into his memories.

He recalled the past as he walked.

He thought back to the spring. Whenever he had gone to sleep, Shinjou would climb up onto his bed to wake him. Some accidents had occurred and he had ended up seeing her butt and pulling on her underwear.

He had not quite known if she was Setsu or Sadame at the time, so on a few occasions, he had considered pulling down her underwear as she slept or focused his mind in the off chance he had awoken to the psychic power to see through her underwear.

Unfortunately, his training had been insufficient and Shinjou had confessed before his powers had manifested.

…That takes me back.

A lot had happened during the summer and fall too, but he decided to immerse himself in those memories once he returned to the dorm. Still, he did remember how abnormally cute she had been at the end of summer when she had tried on her swimsuit one last time before putting it away for the year. She had even posed in front of the mirror.

Watching her from hiding had truly warmed his heart. She had knocked him to the ground once she noticed him, of course.

…That really does take me back.

He then realized he would never be able to touch her again.

“Shinjou-kun…”

…Could I imagine this library wall is Shinjou-kun?

He tried touching it. He placed his hand on the concrete wall and imagined the roundness.

“Shinjou-kun!”

He tried for three seconds before giving up. It was no use. Imagination was not an adequate substitute for some things. Especially when his impatience had led him to overlook the elementary fact that concrete was hard and cold.

…I really should have made a plaster mold of her.

Was some sixth sense at work when I felt the need to do that? he wondered.

Suddenly, he realized he was alone in the library.

“…”

He fell silent and sat in a nearby chair.

The day before last, they had held a meeting and trial in the library and Shinjou had rushed in at the very last moment to save him.

That was the very opposite of the situation during the Army's attack, he thought.

"I really do think the two of us are well-balanced opposites," he muttered. "I am so serious, pure, and moral, but you still find a way to naturally seduce me. It was wonderful how you would cheer me on even as I lost myself in your charm."

He sighed and looked up to the ceiling.

He decided he would head to their classroom, leave through the emergency exit, and then maybe visit the cafeteria before returning to the dorm.

He removed Georgius from his left hand, spread his fingers, and looked to the ring there.

Shinjou had placed it there the day before last.

It was the final thing she had given him that had a physical form.

His gaze dropped to Georgius.

"I wish I could have told you that Georgius's will was based on your father."

He removed the other Georgius as well, placed them both on the desk in front of him, and finally lowered his head.

"Father, I am sorry."

He kept his head lowered for a full five seconds, breathed in, and looked back up.

He took both Georgiuses and stood up within the empty library.

But suddenly…

"?"

He spotted a certain color in the dark library.

That color was white.

It was sitting on a desk in the area designated as a rest area.

"A stack of paper?"

He remembered the day before when Shinjou had told him to wait and he remembered what she had been doing.

…Her novel.

He ran over on reflex.

His leg slammed into a chair he had overlooked and his swinging arm collided with a desk in the darkness, but he did not even feel the pain.

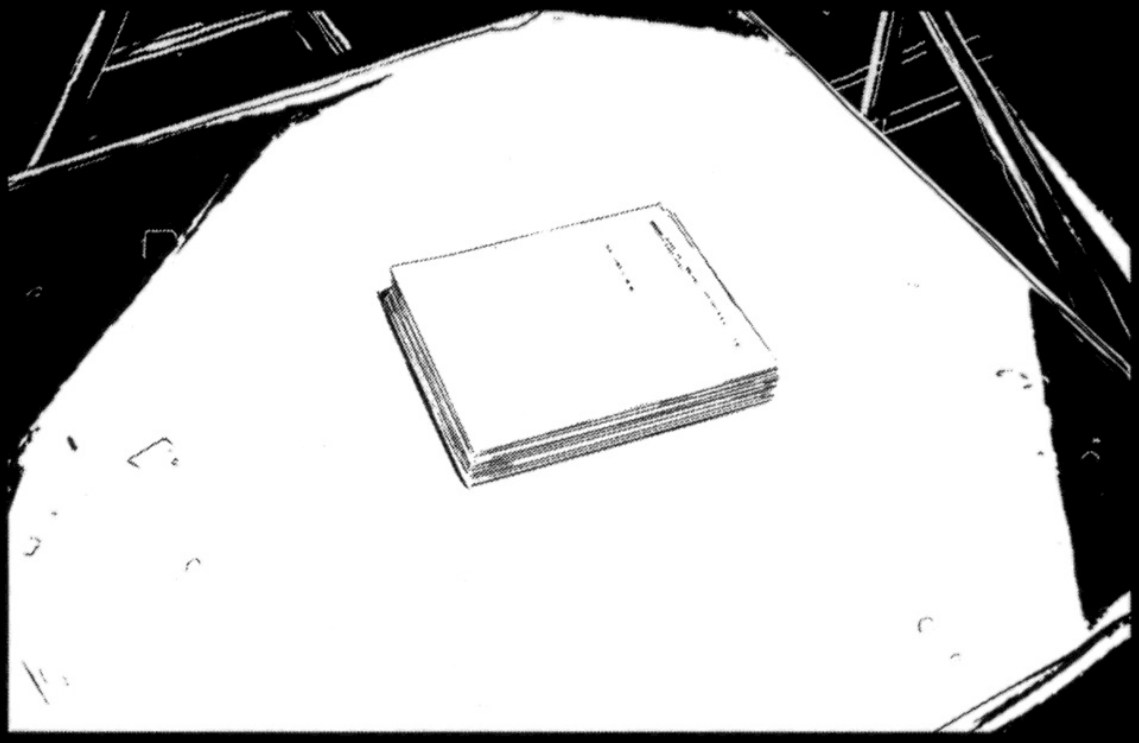
"Shinjou-kun!!"

He arrived at the desk and grabbed the stack in both hands.

He grabbed what Shinjou had created and left here.

Chapter 16

“Wiping Away Unease”



There is only one way
It is neither awkward nor skillful
All you must do is not let go

●

Sayama thought the novel was good.

That was different from calling it enjoyable.

Feeling sad or angry were not exactly enjoyable things.

Those feelings and others it gave him were what led him to call it good.

He read it in the library, in the hallway, in the classroom, in the emergency exit landing, in the empty cafeteria, and pretty much anywhere.

He even read it while walking around outside.

If he had been in a train, he would likely have read it without holding onto the hanging strap and without paying any attention to the scenery around him. He would have leaned forward when he was supposed to focus, he would have grown angry when he was supposed to feel anger, and he would have laughed despite the people around him when he was supposed to laugh.

It was that kind of good novel.

He read through it carefully.

This was Shinjou's novel and it was what she had left with him, but those thoughts did not even enter his head.

He tidily read through it while only flipping back to check on the foreshadowing.

Sayama was the type to read just about anything, but that was why he had a certain rule.

…I can only read this book for the first time once.

It was a simple fact. Everyone could only read any book for the first time just once.

Because he would read just about anything, Sayama felt he could never forget what it meant to read something for the first time.

He could not casually skim through it.

However, a good book still made the reader want to read through it as quickly as possible.

That was the kind of novel this was.

It was the story of a boy negotiating with eleven worlds and guiding them to a new world.

The protagonist boy had an awfully strange personality. He was disagreeable and he would suddenly grow perverted or insane, so Sayama could not help but wonder what was wrong with his brain. He especially thought the protagonist boy went too far when he thrice pulled on one of the heroine's body parts in the bath.

…But this must be well written. For some reason, it is really easy to identify with him!

The heroine was clearly Shinjou herself.

Then was the protagonist modeled after Sayama?

…I feel like she gave me some horrible characteristics here.

But that likely showed how comfortable she was with him.

He could feel a connection to her even in those subtle facts, so he gave a satisfied sigh.

It was an interesting story.

Unable to contain his emotions any longer, Sayama read what Shinjou had created.

This was what she had made.

If it was something that only she could have made…

…Then you could call this a part of her. No…

If the novel contained many things, including what had happened when they met and what had happened afterwards…

“Could you call this another version of her?”

It had no physical body, but it contained the will that had moved her body and produced her words.

So Sayama responded in kind.

He conversed with the will inside the book.

There was nothing strange about it. There was a will contained inside the book, so it would have been even stranger had he stayed silent and still when that will moved him to emotion. He would not gain anything by holding back.

Shinjou had often spoken to herself and smiled while playing video games.

She had moved the controller and her body as one, and when her character died…

“Ahhhh!”

Or when she won…

“Yes!”

And when she got worked up…

“Achohhh!!”

When he thought about it, he had a feeling she was always shouting, but that was cute too. When she grew especially focused and got careless with the hem of her shirt, her cuteness would double and create a heat island in his heart.

…Splendid.

Sayama read the novel as he recalled that.

Sometimes, an interesting turn-of-events would surprise him.

“Ha ha. I never thought of that.”

Sometimes, he would get lost in thought.

“Hm… That was a good question.”

Sometimes, those thoughts would all be cleared away.

“How thrilling!”

Sometimes, he would feel sadness or joy.

“Ahh, what a good story.”

For him, reading through the words and turning the pages was not a means of finishing the book. He was placing himself on an equal level with the book.

Books required someone to create them. They could not be planted in the

ground to make them grow on their own.

Sayama distinctly sensed Shinjou's presence in the written words and what they showed him.

He felt like she was holding his hand without letting go.

She squeezed his hand to tell him she was there, but she did not squeeze too hard.

What she wanted to tell him was written there.

"I…"

He read it.

●

She spoke to him.

"Will you always be by my side?"

"Yes, I promise. I will always be by your side."

She breathed a sigh of relief at his words.

And that seemed to be why he asked her about it.

"Why did you just sigh in relief?"

"Eh?" she responded.

After a pause, she realized what the question meant.

"Oh. I was just thinking how happy I am that you promised that."

She smiled.

"Even if we're separated or alone, I'll never be unhappy because I know someone promised me that."

"Really?"

"Really. If there's someone who promised me that, then even when I'm alone…I know I'm the one who can always be with that person." She bent her eyes in a smile as she answered. "I wish someone would have told me this when I was alone so long ago. I wish someone would have told me that, even though I was alone at the time, I would find someone I could be with and that only I could be with."

She then asked him something.

"Hey, will you be with me forever?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then," she asked. "Will you…always be happy, too?"

●

Sayama finished reading the novel.

Up ahead, he saw a dark hallway and that hallway's wall.

There was a steel door there. It contained the number of their room.

He reached for the knob and found it was locked.

He held the book in one hand, the key in the other, and opened the door.

The door-shaped rectangle of darkness revealed an empty room, but…

"Yes," he said. "I promised I would always be with you."

He squeezed the novel he held in one arm.

He breathed in.

“I am back, Shinjou-kun. Back to our home.”

He then entered the empty room and silently yet strongly closed the door.

●

Sayama observed the dorm room.

It was dark. The only light was the moonlight, so the window shined with a dark bluish light.

The desk was the same as when he had left the day before.

He looked to the right wall, but there was no sign of the closet having been opened.

He looked to the bed on the left…

“——————”

No one was sleeping on Shinjou’s bed.

The blanket was untouched after the bed had been made.

But he approached her bed and placed Baku on the blanket.

When he set Shinjou’s novel next to the pillow, he felt like she was actually there.

He pressed his face into the bed and sniffed at the surface like a dog.

He lay there motionless for about three minutes before slowly getting up.

He did not bother fixing his disheveled hair.

“Anymore would be a waste. …I need to seal it up to preserve it as is. Then I need to have the international UCATs arrange to register it as a World Heritage Site.”

For the time being, he sat courteously on the floor.

“This is quite the tea ceremony.”

He bowed and got back up.

He stood up, tossed his coat on the desk by the window, and removed his vest.

He took off his shoes, picked Baku up from the bed, and placed him on the desk.

“How much energy will I have after getting some sleep?”

He was worried yet a little hopeful as he climbed the ladder toward his own bed.

As soon as his head rose to the same level as his bed, he found a butt.

●

There was a butt in front of him.

To be classier, it was a derrière and it was not wearing any underwear.

“Is this…?”

It was lying on its side and split in two.

Calm down, he told himself.

You just read Shinjou-kun’s novel and your heart was shifting from

depression to excitement. The blood must be rushing to the right side of your brain.

This is most likely a hallucination.

…No.

I would not be hallucinating, he decided.

"Then is the butt god thanking me for my devotion to the butt spirit?"

…That would mean this is not an imaginary hallucination! It is the astral body of the butt god!

Touching a spirit required great mental strength, so Sayama checked on his remaining MP.

…It is at four digits, so I have enough to take a major hit!

Without thinking, he clenched his left fist and shook it up and down, but then he realized something.

The butt had legs and the bottom of a shirt rested at the top.

"…?"

He could tell the owner of the butt had turned in their sleep, sticking their hips out from below the blanket.

Some clothing was folded up by the pillow, but it appeared to be a hospital gown.

That could only mean one thing.

"Is the butt god ill?"

Baku frantically shook his head on the desk, but Sayama ignored him.

That was when the curves bent before his eyes.

"Nn…"

With a nasal groan, the body squirmed.

It curled up to hide within the blanket, but it was too sleepy to actually pull the blanket over its hips.

As a result, the butt gently poked out toward Sayama.

He really, really wanted to touch it, but he shook his head.

"How could I even think of touching the butt god out of mere curiosity or idle interest?"

"Nnah…"

The body squirmed again and the two round pieces of flesh bent a little more.

So out of mere curiosity and idle interest, Sayama reached out and vocalized his action.

"Touch."

"Waaaaaaahhh!?"

The blanket shot up and the person underneath bent backwards.

Their head rushed toward the bookshelf by the head of the bed, the books toppled over, and the suit hanging from the ceiling was knocked down on top of the person.

"Wh-wh-what!? What!? A monster!? A super monster!? Or an airstrike!?"

Sayama saw who frantically dug themselves out from the pile of books and the

suit.

“Shinjou…-kun?”

●

Sayama called out to her, but she was too panicked to notice.

Her eyes must not have adjusted to the dark because she frantically looked around.

“A-a molester!? O-or what? What? …The enemy!?”

Perhaps for self-defense, she pulled cutting charms from somewhere and held one in either hand.

Sayama had difficulty grasping the situation.

…Why?

Japanese UCAT had been destroyed.

So why was Shinjou here?

Was this a hallucination? Except the sensation when he touched her had been real.

Then what was going on?

He thought about it but found no answer.

He looked to Shinjou who was in a complete panic.

He smiled and told her to calm down.

“Ha ha ha. Calm down.”

She raised her head in surprise and looked left and right with her unadjusted eyes.

“Wh-where!? Where are you!?”

Sayama nodded at her question and spread his arms invitingly on the ladder.

“I am right here, Shinjou-kun!”

“There you are!!”

A horizontal line of a cutting concept silently flew toward him.

He quickly removed his feet from the ladder, fell three rungs down, and let the cutting power sweep by above him.

The thick curtains to the two-level closet behind him were easily cut. That one strike would have easily beheaded him.

Then he heard Shinjou from the bed above.

“I missed!? Th-then once more! Once morrrre! Do your best, power of the headhunters!

“W-wait! Stop acting like some strange leader and calm down, Shinjou-kun!”

Sayama turned on the lights.

He heard a cry and the creaking of someone squirming on the bed, so he sighed.

After settling his feelings, he climbed the ladder.

He once more found the girl surrounded by a suit and books on the bed.

“Shinjou-kun?”

He saw Shinjou holding her unbuttoned shirt to her chest and between the

legs.

She raised her knees and frowned, but she seemed to have noticed him.

“Sayama…-kun?”

They then spoke in unison.

“What is going on?”

After a while, they both reached the same conclusion.

“We need to calm down.”

They both nodded at once and lowered their shoulders.

Sayama climbed onto the bed and sat in front of Shinjou. The suit and books were scattered around them, but this was no time to worry about that.

He simply wanted to determine whether the person in front of him was real or not.

“Shinjou-kun, may I touch you?”

“That was sudden. Are you okay?”

“Ha ha ha. A quick touch was nowhere near enough. I want to touch you more.”

“You’re not okay at all!!”

She got mad, but this was the usual pattern.

So…

“What does this mean?” he asked.

Shinjou tilted her head.

“That’s what I want to know.”

She tilted her head even more.

“What happened to the battle with Mikoku-san? And I was in the schoolyard, so why…?”

With that, she seemed to realize where she was.

“Huh?”

She brought a hand to her forehead and glanced toward Sayama.

“Why…am I here?”

He did not answer that question.

He had no way of knowing the answer.

But he gave into the fact that she knew she was *here*.

He placed his knees down in front of him, embraced Shinjou as she turned around, and fell onto the bed with her.

“Ah.”

He simply gave her a deep, deep embrace.

He did not let go. He did not loosen his grip. He felt like she would leave him if he did, so he held her tightly in his arms.

She shrank down in his arms and his chest, she briefly breathed in, and she relaxed.

“U-um…Sayama-kun? I’m cold.”

Nevertheless, the warmth he felt from her seemed more important.

He lifted his head and placed his arms into her shirt and along her sides.

He embraced her slender back.

An “ah” escaped her lips, so he sealed them with his own.

“Nnah.… S-Sayama-kun. W-wait, um…”

Sayama did not feel sorry for what he had done. He only felt thankful for her presence and he confirmed that presence with the things only he could do to her.

His arms embraced her flesh, so he placed his lips on hers, touched her with his tongue, and pressed his neck and cheek against her.

When he removed his lips from hers, she let out a breath and went limp.

He saw her flushed cheeks, her unresisting arms, and her body unhidden by her partially-removed clothing.

Her expression was filled with confusion and joy.

“Wh-what happened? Were you really worried about me?”

“No.” Sayama shook his head as she lowered the ends of her eyebrows. “I was just about to conclude that I needed to think of a next step for our relationship.”

“You mean…?”

“To put it softly, I will express it with my voice. I would use my imagination to go ‘nwah’ or use pictures to go ‘fnh’.”

“That’s a pretty awful way of putting it softly.”

But Shinjou seemed to have understood what he meant.

“I see,” she said while curling up and nodding. “So that dream was real.”

“Dream?”

“Yes, it was a strange dream…with a strange old man.”

She suddenly laughed bitterly.

“Looking back, that was your grandfather and mother. They looked just like they did in the pictures and those dreams of the past.”

“That truly is a bizarre dream.”

“But…they were nice people.”

It sounded as if she were treating the dream like it was real.

“And? Um…”

She slowly spread her legs as if to accept his body and her right hand reached for his cheek.

“Hey, did you notice?”

She took a breath.

“You’re crying right now.”

Am I? he wondered as a drop also fell from the corner of Shinjou’s eye and toward her ear.

“Are you hurting, Sayama-kun?”

“No…I am not, Shinjou-kun. Because you are with me.”

“I see,” she said. “Then why are you crying? And why am I crying?”

She laughed and placed her hand around his shoulder.

Her face grew even redder.

“U-um? Sayama-kun? This might be sudden, but what day is it?”

“December 24. It is early morning, though.”

“I see.” She took a while to continue. “Itaru-san was the one to tell me a long time ago, but today’s my birthday.”

“Mine too.”

Those two words seemed to drop down toward her and she moved away from him a little bit.

“Eh? …Ehh?”

“Why are you surprised? Seeing you again is such a wonderful present.”

“S-seeing me isn’t worth that much, you know?”

“But it is,” he insisted. “I, Sayama Mikoto, will head to the Diet this very morning and propose that today be made our own holiday. We can call it the Seeing Shinjou-kun Day. …How about it? We can abbreviate it as SS Day.”

“I don’t think the Germans would like that very much.”

“Probably not,” he agreed before thinking a bit. “Do you have a present for me?”

When she shook her head, he realized he had to give her something no matter what.

But she glared back at him.

“Are you thinking something dangerous?”

“Of course not,” he said before suddenly adding something else. “Can I ask one thing?”

“What is it?”

“Well. Instead of getting a present, I would like to check on you. I want to make sure you are really here.”

Will she be opposed to that? he wondered.

But she nodded even if hesitantly.

She then looked him in the eye and nodded again.

“I want to check to make sure you’re here too.”

●

Kazami was taking a shower.

Her parents were out. They seemed to have a job in the city center.

…Come to think of it, they said something about a Christmas concert a while back.

There was a possibility her mother would sing again.

Would she finally end her ban on singing?

Kazami felt that would be a wonderful thing.

She held her wet hair between her hands to let the shampoo soak in. She then brushed her hair upwards to even it out, wet it, and let it foam up.

…Maybe I should make some food once I’m done in here.

After entering the house and managing to relax, Izumo had turned on the TV to check the news about Okutama, so she had gone to take a shower as if

purifying herself.

He would probably take a shower next, so she could fix up a quick late-night meal for when he got out.

She had already checked the contents of the fridge.

Since they had been leaving for a bit, her parents had mostly left only the food that would keep, but there was always some leftover rice in there somewhere. There had also been two or three eggs that would last a few days.

After thawing out the rice, she could throw in some wieners and eggs for chazuke or she could make a quick zosui. Given the amount of rice, she could also make fried rice.

Something occurred to her after thinking that far.

"I'm staying pretty positive."

She smiled bitterly. Despite everything that had happened, she could not argue with her empty stomach.

She was worried about everyone who had been at Japanese UCAT, but there was nothing she could do at the moment. In that case, would it be best to eat what she could and get some rest?

She did not know.

She did know that she would start to feel tired if she ate and rested.

Staying awake would show how worried she was for the others, but…

…*Would everyone want me to get so little sleep I can't do anything right?*

Was that just an excuse coming from her exhaustion?

She did not know and she had no way of answering. She only knew she had climbed onto the three-stage catapult of a bath, food, and sleep.

…*Instead of staying awake today, I'll get moving tomorrow.*

With that decided, she placed her head under the hot water and slapped her cheeks.

"That's what it means to stay positive!!"

She looked up, and…

"That's my Chisato!!"

Izumo opened the door and stepped inside.

"——————!?"

The situation was so sudden.

She was unable to react properly and she simply covered her body with her arms to protect herself.

Izumo gave her a relaxed smile.

"Huh? Fancy meeting you here, Chisato."

"Don't tell such blatant lies!!"

A right roundhouse kick knocked Izumo into the empty bathtub.

●

Shinjou was kissed by Sayama.

She was in Sadame's body.

The room's lights were still on as her shirt was removed.

Sayama checked over her entire body.

The room was lit, but he seemed to want to confirm the shape of her body by touch. His hands touched her and pushed down to confirm there was something below the skin. He massaged her and his lips crawled across her.

"S-Sayama-kun… Y-you're pretty obscene, you know?"

"No, I am merely checking on you, Shinjou-kun. …It is all this hand's fault! This hand! Now, Shinjou-kun, hit this hand for me! Give it a thorough flogging with your butt or chest!"

"You're good at getting worked up over the most meaningless things."

Meanwhile, she squirmed as he touched her.

When she moaned and twisted her arm, the arm touched one of the fallen books.

It was lying on Sayama's suit which was laid out below her.

"U-um, Sayama-kun, your suit."

"You want to spice things up with the suit!? Testament, then let us move below the light. …More light!"

He started to get up, so she grabbed him with her legs to pull him back down.

He lost his balance and lay back on top of her.

She twisted her sweaty body to catch his strength.

"Um? That's not what I meant. Will the books and suit…be okay?"

"Anything lying below you counts as a bed, Shinjou-kun."

Is that how it works? she wondered as he suddenly smiled.

"I read your novel."

"Eh!?"

That was the first she had heard of that.

Her body temperature quickly reached a boil. The words "wah" and "wait" came to mind, but he spoke first.

"It seems you enjoy it…when you are kissed."

"No, um, wait. Uh…"

"You say you do not like it…but you cannot resist, can you?"

"Th-that's um…that's what you call fiction."

Her flustered comment made him smile.

"Ha ha ha. Yes, it would be fiction, wouldn't it?"

"Um, y-yes. It's fiction! Fiction!"

Sayama laughed some more and immediately pulled her in close.

"But we must not forget the 'non' that precedes it."

Before she could even cry out, his fingertip entered her navel.

It felt like his finger was reaching deep within her belly.

"——————"

Her hips jumped up in surprise and she managed to keep her lower half in a sitting position.

"Ah…hee."

She caught her breath and Sayama tilted his head.

“How strange… That reaction was supposed to be fictional.”

“S-Sayama-kun, quit teasing me!”

“I am not teasing you, Shinjou-kun.”

“Th-then what are you doing?”

He thought a bit before answering.

“I am crossing the boundary between fiction and nonfiction.”

“That’s a really ordinary way of being ridiculous.”

As she spoke, she felt his fingers arriving below her navel.

“Ah.”

His fingers moved both quickly and slowly down her raised belly and gave a knock on the very bottom.

“Nn.”

When his fingers tapped softly and probingly, her voice just about left her, but her lips were covered up.

While she was unable to breathe, his fingers checked on the curves at the very bottom of her belly.

“Ah…”

He stroked his fingers up and down.

She gave another monosyllabic cry and breathed in through the airway opened by leaning back her head.

“S-Sayama-kun… Th-that’s indecent.”

“Hm, then let us arrange the environment to make it more decent. …Would you like to listen to an educational radio program? I believe they are having a direct competition on a rerun of the social studies program ‘Unemployed Old Man’.”

“That would just make me sad.”

“And after you asked for it yourself? What a selfish child.”

Hearing that made her smile and laugh bitterly.

With her hips still raised, she gave herself in to Sayama’s lips and stroking hand.

His lips lowered to her chest, sucked, and then pecked at various parts of her body.

His fingers continued stroking and pressing in on her. She wanted to resist the trembling ticklishness that created, but she only shook her waist a little since moving away would have been a shame.

But when she leaned her body back, his fingers were accepted inside as he stroked upwards.

“…Hyah.”

She frantically tried to move her body back, but he stroked and swept his fingers upwards and repeated the action again and again. It was like he was repeatedly knocking her body back upwards.

“…!”

The repeated upwards action caused her to tremble and she tried to catch her

breath.

But just then, he moved his fingers even more strongly, except this time he pushed the wetness down and back.

The sudden reversal of the movement and the feeling of the fingers so far down caused Shinjou to tremble and gasp in surprise.

“——————”

For a while, she felt as if something were leaving her body.

The next thing she knew, he had grabbed the hands extended by her side and he pulled her down.

This was the opposite of before.

Sayama was down between her legs. She was sitting with her legs spread, his arms were pulling her forward by the butt, and her arched belly and hips were thrust out toward him.

At some point, his stroking fingers had been replaced by his damp lips and tongue.

“Ah, S-Sayama-kun, that’s embarrassing…”

When he said nothing, she grew a little afraid and the throbbing she felt produced an honest cry.

“S-say something, Sayama-kun. Please…”

“On’t orry. Ere’s othing oo orry about Injou-un.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth still on me!!”

He pulled on her hands and she leaned back enough for her butt to rise from the bed.

She was offering up her defenseless self to his mouth.

She cried out as he reached deep inside her, but she eventually was unable to even do that.

“…Nn.”

A long tremor ran through her body and, when she came to her senses again, her body was limp.

She breathed out, looked up, and found him there.

“Shinjou-kun.”

“…?”

He nodded at her questioning breath.

“Are you there?”

“…Yes.”

She answered and turned her body to face him.

Aware of his warm breath, she got up and moved toward him.

“U-um?”

She spoke with the ends of her eyebrows lowered and a hand held up to her lips.

“You were worried about me, weren’t you? So, um… first, I’ll show you for sure that I’m here. And this time, I’ll go first after that too, okay?”

Before he could stop her, she touched him herself.

She showed him she was there using the reverse of the method he had just used on her.

She brought her lips in close and stroked with her tongue.

“Sayama-kun… You can do what you want to me, okay? You’ve saved my life so many times, so this is my present…this is Sadame’s present to you.”

She felt him stroke her hair and she felt a dampness on her lips as she took him into her mouth.

“Sayama-kun, don’t hesitate to give me something, okay?”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded, shook her body, and looked up at him.

“I’ll show you that I’m here. As the reverse of before, I’ll accept you…and accept you inside. So afterwards, you show me that you’re here, okay?”

●

An intense sound shook the Kazami house’s bathroom.

It came from Izumo who had fallen into the bathtub while spinning.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow! What the hell are you doing!?”

“That’s my line!! You surprise peeping tom!!”

Kazami switched the shower’s mode from “normal” to “direct fire” to “warship”, turned the water temperature to cold, and fired. The water attack was powerful enough to create a mist and Izumo shouted from beyond the spray.

“How in the world was that peeping!? And stop! Seriously stop, Chisato!”

“Will you apologize!?”

“Your body sure is beautiful.”

She clicked her tongue, switched the water to a lighter mode, wrapped a towel around herself, and sighed.

…What is he thinking at a time like this?

She found Izumo looking up at her with an elbow on the edge of the bathtub.

“Feeling better?”

“Well, I guess.”

She gave another deep sigh, sat on the edge of the bathtub, and rested her own head on her hand.

“What were you thinking? And why is your head full of dirty things at a time like this!?”

“Well…”

He lowered his head a little, looked up at the ceiling, and slowly answered.

“You’d be in trouble if you were alone.”

She felt her cheeks flush at how spot on his answer was, so she looked away.

“That isn’t true.”

“Then,” he said. “There’s no need for us to get worked up right now. It isn’t our turn to act.”

“But!”

She turned around and remembered why she was getting so worked up.

She remembered so many people's faces and realized this was not good.

"But…"

She trailed off and her vision blurred.

"Ahh, sorry, sorry. I said too much, didn't I?"

He reached over, grabbed the shower, and sprayed lukewarm water over her head.

Her bangs created a wet black shadow that completely covered her face.

The water flowed down her face, leaving only her trembling voice.

"I don't like this… I don't…"

"Don't say that. This was my fault."

"It was."

Her shoulders shook and she breathed in as if to wash her downturned mouth with the water.

"This was…all your fault."

"Sure, sure, sure. It was my fault. All mine."

"It's always you. It's always your fault. You're always perverted, you're undisciplined, you eat too much, you buy things impulsively, and you collect strange magazines… Ahh, now I'm getting mad!"

"Wait, wait. I think your anger gauge is rising on its own, Chisato."

"And whose fault is that?"

He suddenly brushed up her bangs.

She looked up through the stream of water with one eye and saw Izumo peering down at her.

"Just say it's my fault. That's your special privilege."

"A-and you're fine with that? Really?"

"Sure." He thought for a moment. "Because you always apologize afterwards."

She paused for a moment when she heard that.

"____"

She smiled bitterly.

That's true, she thought and so she exhaled.

"Sorry."

She pressed her cheek against his chest as she spoke.

"It's painful for you too, isn't it?"

"I'm fine. You don't need to worry about it."

"Really? Why?"

It took a while, but he finally answered.

"When my mom died, I thought nothing could ever be more painful. And after that, I got you by my side."

So…

"If anything really painful happens to me, it'll be when you aren't with me, so…you don't need to worry about me. And since I don't have to worry about

you either, it isn't as painful, right?"

She was speechless, but he continued right on.

"It's the same if you do lose someone. We know we at least didn't make them feel the pain of losing us and that's gotta be a really good thing."

"B-but…!"

She wanted to say something. She could not think of anything to say, but she still wanted to say something.

That was when Izumo placed his hand on her hair and gave a bitter laugh.

"Let's just leave it at that. …You can't survive just by sitting around, so you did good, Chisato. At the very least, you kept anyone from hurting because of you. Right?"

She responded to that question by rising up along his chest and wrapping her arms around his neck.

"You're so stupid," she said as she placed her lips on his and wondered what kind of expression was on her face. "You really are stupid, so I'll keep saying it: you're stupid. That's my special privilege."

"Sayama's been stealing that privilege from you an awful lot, you know?"

"That's fine." She leaned against him and smiled. "Getting him to apologize to me later is another special privilege of mine. So…"

She knew even her ears were red as she continued.

"Will you apologize to me?"

Izumo answered her with an embrace.

The warm water brought their flesh closer together.

"Ah…"

Kazami hesitated and narrowed her eyes.

But a moment later, she heard a sudden voice from the house's entrance.

"Chisato!? Are you there!? Mama and papa came back to get something we forgot!"

The two in the bath exchanged a glance.

"Does this mean…?"

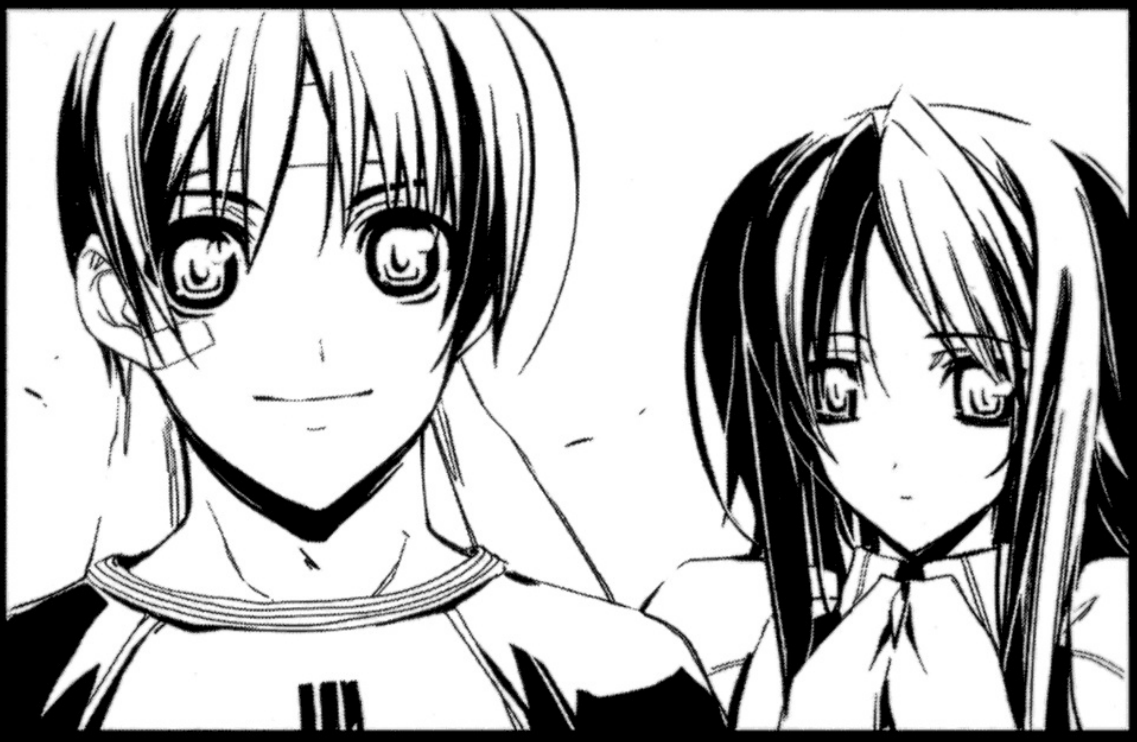
Izumo nodded at Kazami's serious question.

"We have no choice but to show off our love!"

She slammed him into the bathtub once more.

Chapter 17

“A Dedication to Relief”



Are you sure you want me?
I am
You wouldn’t want me
That is not true

●

A long line cut across the land below the dark sky.

The illuminated westward-running line was a runway.

It was the western spare runway at Yokota Air Base.

Four people stood in front of the hangar located at one end.

They were two boys and two girls.

The boy with dark skin crossed his arms.

“Noah is sitting above Tokyo after turning into the Leviathan and we can’t contact anyone who was in Japanese UCAT. On top of that, our weapons can only stop the Leviathan temporarily and who knows if that will work again. … What are you planning, Hiba?”

He turned his sunglasses to face Hiba.

“The injury in your side has only been treated with first aid. I’m sure you had a reason to come here without even heading home, but shouldn’t you get treatment from the macho men in the medical room instead of calling just us here?”

Hiba scratched his head.

He let out a white breath with his eyebrows lowered a bit in a smile.

“Well, there’s something I wanted to show you first. I wanted to show just you and Heo-san.”

Heo tilted her head and lowered her eyebrows.

“Something you want to show us before you meet the macho men? It isn’t something perverted, is it?”

“Wh-what makes you think I’m a pervert!?”

Harakawa whispered into Heo’s ear.

“As hard as it is to believe, he isn’t aware of it, so try not to mention it. If you corner him, he probably really will do it. Keep in mind that this is the guy who took a hit to the crotch to make people laugh.”

“Oh, right. Testament. Understood. …I’ll try not to encourage him. It would make my teacher sad if one of us turned into a criminal.”

Heo forced a smile and looked back to Hiba.

“Wh-what is it you want to show us? I’m really looking forward to it.”

“I really feel like you have an ulterior motive when you say that…”

Hiba glared at her but then sighed. He turned to look at the girl with long black hair standing next to him.

“Well, I had us come here because of what happened to Japanese UCAT. There’s nowhere left to treat my wound, but also…”

He nodded.

“Mikage-san said she was worried everyone might be feeling a little hopeless.”

Hearing that name, Heo looked over and saw a slight smile on the other girl’s face.

“Mikage, do you not feel hopeless or like we’re completely outmatched?”

Mikage returned Heo’s gaze and tilted her head.

“The Leviathan is sad.”

“Eh?”

Heo looked surprised and Mikage turned to the east.

Tokyo was there.

The lights of Yokota Air Base kept the dark of night away, but the sky above the city center was even brighter.

The end of the year was approaching and Mikage looked to the sky illuminated by the bright city below.

“The Leviathan is so big, but it’s alone with Mikoku.”

Mikage looked down where something was moving within Yokota Air Base.

They were inside the concept space surrounding the base, but the main eastern runway was filled with the aircraft carrying various UCAT representatives that had arrived through the concept space corridor and mechanical dragons from the United States.

The spare runway they stood on would eventually be used as an apron.

“We have everyone here,” said Mikage as she watched their movement.

“B-but,” cut in Heo. “The Leviathan’s power is absolute!”

“If you’re powerless does that mean you can’t fight back?”

Mikage asked her question while looking at them all and it stopped Heo.

Harakawa suddenly patted her shoulder and looked to both Mikage and Hiba.

“Let’s not act so self-important. Heo especially has learned to get lost in her worries. If she stumbles even a little, she’ll make a huge fuss and show off how hopeless things are while naked. …You could call it a sudden-onset self-obsession disease.”

“H-Harakawa, you don’t have to be so mean about it!”

Heo frantically looked around and found Hiba giving her a puzzled look.

“Wow… Is that like the person who complains about the school in their graduation essay and says how unfair they had it, but they don’t actually mean it and just want to show off?”

“N-no, that’s not what this is…”

“Well, when Heo starts pointing out problems like that, she’s bound to get other people involved,” said Harakawa. “And the first up to bat will definitely be me. I should probably evacuate to a nuclear shelter.”

“N-no, like I was saying…”

“A shelter?” asked Mikage. “Heo, are you as powerful as a nuclear weapon?”

“No, wait, um, uh…”

Thick sweat poured from Heo’s entire body.

“U-um, are we really still doing this? Are we still continuing with the usual hate that completely ignores the individual in question? Really?”

“Calm down, Heo Thunderson. We are not ignoring you.”

“H-Harakawa. R-really? You aren’t ignoring me?”

“No, we aren’t,” he said. “But don’t infect me with your brain disease, Heo Thunderson. I have a busy life.”

“You’re mean!”

Hiba held out a hand to calm her.

Once she and Harakawa turned back his way, Hiba stood in front of Mikage.

“Anyway, whatever we might say, we’re the people who always end up fighting.”

“In other words, we’re dangerous people.”

“Harakawa-san, the way you know just when to take the shot is an art.”

Heo nodded in agreement and Mikage placed her hands on Hiba’s shoulders.

She then looked to Heo.

“Heo, you have a will, don’t you?”

“Eh?”

Heo hesitated and turned to Harakawa.

He averted his gaze and looked up into the sky.

“How about you answer on instinct like you always do?”

Hearing that, Heo sighed and looked to Mikage.

“Yes, I have a will.”

She directed her answer toward Mikage’s eyes and Mikage looked right back into her eyes.

“Then…let’s go hear the Leviathan and Mikoku’s cries.”

“Eh?”

“Before, you said people should cry when they want to, so let’s go hear it head-on. We’re the only ones that can do that. We’re the only ones that can grab their hand as they try to sweep everything away.”

“But,” said Heo. “Can our power reach the Leviathan?”

“It can,” confirmed Hiba. “At the very least, the two of us can.”

Heo glanced over at Harakawa.

“Harakawa, in weekly manga, isn’t it always the first one to declare victory that loses?”

“Shh. It’s true the short ones and huge ones get taken out first, but don’t say it loud enough for him to hear. We’ve finally got him back in the usual pattern, after all.”

“Wh-what are you two saying!?” Hiba sounded completely confused. “T-Team Leviathan doesn’t have someone to be the ‘opening act’ for that kind of pattern!”

Harakawa and Heo looked away from Hiba for a full five seconds.

Afterwards, Harakawa patted Heo’s shoulder and she gathered her strength with her head lowered.

For the second time that day, she worked to force a smile.

“U-um, what is this power that you and Mikage have?”

“Is it just me or have you decided you don’t need to take me seriously?”

“Th-that isn’t true. We haven’t at all decided we can just ignore you or look away from you!”

“Y-you do that all the time! You all need to treat me in a way that I can accept! If you do that, then I’m fine being looked down on like a mere animal! Can’t you find a way to make me feel more motivated!? Y’know, like how you would treat a puppy!”

Heo and Harakawa clearly wanted to ask him if he would really be fine with that, but then Mikage pressed up against him from behind.

“If I do this, can you tell how big they are?”

“You’re the best, Mikage-san! I’m absolutely brimming with meaningless motivation!! …Hey, you two! Stop looking at me like I’m a pathetic animal!”

“I don’t really care, so can we move this along, Hiba Ryuuji?”

“Yes.” Hiba maintained his good mood. “At the very least, I’m looking at our power in a different way now.”

“Looking at it in a different way?”

“That’s what I’m about to show you. …At the very least, it should be different than it was when we fought the Leviathan earlier. And…”

As he took a breath, Mikage opened her mouth and looked to Heo.

“Even if all of our power can’t reach it, the power Ryuuji-kun and I have might be able to. …Is this what you call hope? Or is it hopeless?”

“They do say nothing is as hopeless as hope with an uncertain future.”

Harakawa’s comment made Mikage smile.

“Then nothing is as hopeful as hopelessness with a definite future. That means we’ll be fine,” she said. “I think you two and the others have all overlooked something and still have something you can do. We’re about to show you an example.”

Hearing that, Heo took a hurried step forward.

“You’re about to? Um, then shouldn’t you call the others, too?”

“They might get caught in the middle of it if we did. And…”

Mikage closed her eyes.

“You’ll understand once you see it.”

A moment later, Mikage and Hiba spread their arms and cried out in unison.

“Susamikado!!”

●

Kazami apologized.

She was sitting on the floor and wearing a track suit.

She was in the living room and it was already five in the morning.

…Why do we have to have a family meeting now of all times?

The idiot next to her had caused this, but she was also at fault for going along with it.

Thus, she could only bow down to her father who sat in front of her.

She apologized whenever he said anything to her and she used up all of the apologies in her vocabulary.

Sorry.

I’m sorry.
I’m so very sorry.
I am ever so sorry.
My bad.
Please forgive me.
Forgive me, okay?
C’mon, I’m telling you to forgive me.
Forgive me.
Forgive me already.
Just forgive me.
I’m. Telling. You. To. Forgive. Me.
“I-I’m starting to feel like I’m the one being scolded here!”
“Oh, sorry. I got a little carried away.”
Kazami bowed again and finally reached over to slam Izumo’s forehead into the floor.
“We’re sorry!”
Meanwhile, her mother approached.
Kazami slowly looked up and saw her mother handing her father a plate with steam rising from it.
She also saw what was sitting on that white plate.
“Ah! That’s the fried rice I was planning to make!”
“This used up all the rice.”
“You monster!!”
“Have you learned your lesson?”
Kazami felt the hunger in her stomach.
“Well…”
At some point, her mother had grabbed a fan that she used to fan at the fried rice.
…Nwaah! That pepper and cooked fish paste smells so good!
“This is delicious!” said her father. “Your fried rice is so good, mama!!”
“Stoooop! There’s a difference between punishment and bullying!”
She could not help but complain and her mother looked over at her.
The woman lowered her shoulders.
“You know what?”
“What?”
Next to her, Izumo spoke up while wearing a track suit he had borrowed from her father.
“W-wait a second!”
He bowed his own head this time.
“This was my fault for getting carried away! It wasn’t Chisato’s fault at all!”
Kazami was a little surprised.
“K-Kaku. I’m actually kind of moved.”
“Don’t act like it’s never happened before. …But it doesn’t really matter. It

really was my fault.”

Kazami’s father nodded while eating the fried rice.

“But Chisato went along with it, so she is somewhat at fault, Izumo-kun.”

Izumo’s head shot up when he heard that.

His expression was serious, but it immediately crumbled.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

You moron, thought Kazami as she raised a fist, but she stopped when her mother cleared her throat.

Izumo had shrunk away from her fist, but he looked back to the two adults.

“Still, I don’t think it could be helped.”

“Why not?”

“Well,” he began. “If I wasn’t with her, Chisato would’ve started crying.”

“Why would she do that?”

“There’s been some…hard stuff at work.” Izumo chose his words carefully. “Some coworkers might be dead.”

He looked back down toward Kazami’s parents.

He gave them a troubled smile as if seeing how they would respond.

“She’d cry if she was on her own, right? That’s why I had to be with her.”

When she heard that, Kazami swung down her raised fist.

She lightly tapped his shoulder with it.

“I-idiot.”

She did so a few more times.

“D-don’t assume you know what I’ll do. I hate that.”

But he did not seem to mind. He kept his eyes on her parents.

When she stopped moving her arm and lifted her head to look at her parents, she found them looking back at her.

…Wow.

She was not sure what to do about their narrowed eyes and she felt her cheeks growing redder and redder.

“Wh-what’s with all of you?”

“Well,” began her father while scooping more fried rice into his mouth. “I just realized that you’ll always need to rely on someone.”

She bent back as if someone had shot her.

…I can’t stand this.

Is no one going to stick up for my honor? Please come quickly, hero.

But after no one showed up even after asking thrice, she straightened back up.

“I-I’m not relying on anyone. Kaku, y-you need to stop making up excuses for yourself!”

Izumo looked at her with a perfectly serious expression.

“You’re super cute right now, Chisato.”

Without speaking a word, she knocked him to the ground.

Oh, I think this actually made for a decent change of pace, she thought as she

did so.

●

Sayama and Shinjou sat side by side on the bed.

They had their backs to the wall and they spoke about the current situation and Shinjou's novel.

In the darkness, their words brought each other relief and brought smiles to their faces. Heat still remained in their bodies.

Shinjou had put on a shirt.

After they finished talking about the novel's protagonist, Sayama said something more.

"It was good. I want you to write much, much more, Shinjou-kun. Are you going to be an author?"

"I don't think it would be that easy to become one."

"But if you do not go easy on yourself about becoming one, I think you can become one."

"Is that how it works?" she asked before gulping and laughing.

Sayama tilted his head at the laugh and she bent her eyes in a smile.

"I was thinking I could continue making novels about you and the things that happen around us. That would end being a lifework, wouldn't it?"

Her small smile continued to grow.

"So I'm glad I'm alive and I want to defeat the Leviathan. Otherwise, I can't write about what you do afterwards."

She heard Sayama say "I see" and saw him lean back against the wall.

"If you will write about me, that could help me out, too."

"Help you?"

"Yes."

He nodded.

"——————"

After a while, he brushed a hand through his hair and said more.

"Just between the two of us, I do not actually have anything like your novel."

●

Dumbfounded, Shinjou could only hear his quiet words ringing in her ears.

"Izumo has IAI, Kazami has her singing, the Hiba boy has the Hiba School, Mikage-kun has the many joys she will find in the human world, Harakawa has his precious everyday life, and Heo-kun apparently wants to be a teacher."

This early morning space shared only by the two of them may have been making him more talkative.

He spoke of what his teammates had.

It may have sounded cheap to call them "dreams", but they were what allowed those people to get serious.

Shinjou watched Sayama speak of their teammates' futures, but then he

closed his eyes.

“Do you understand? I can get serious when I need to, but the Leviathan Road was given to me by my grandfather and all I am doing is settling the past my grandfather and father left behind. Once that is over, I will still be able to get serious, but I will have nothing left but the work directly before me. I can only think of one other thing I could have.”

“What’s that?”

“Yes, perhaps I can get serious about loving you.”

“Calm down.”

Even as she said that, she wondered what would happen if he did get serious about that. She could not imagine what a Leviathan Road level of loving would be.

But when he opened his eyes, he was expressionless. It was the usual expressionless look, but…

…He’s worried?

Noticing that, she took his hand and opened her mouth.

“Don’t worry. We can work together to find what comes after the Leviathan Road.”

That may have sounded a little too vague because he did not turn toward her.

Regardless, she created even more words.

“If the world is able to continue…then let’s continue seriously negotiating and fighting while we search.”

He still did not look her way.

“Do you really think anything on the level of the Leviathan Road will happen? I cannot imagine it would.”

“You’re wrong.”

Her immediate answer finally got him to turn toward her.

The surprise in his eyes asked if she was serious, but she did not falter.

She was confident that he was not someone that would be stopped here.

No matter how he viewed himself, she had absolute confidence in that fact.

…I even have proof.

She felt she should tell him. He had revealed his own thoughts, so she wanted to answer in kind.

So she brought a hand to her chest and commanded her heart to speak honestly.

“Sayama-kun, are you less than your grandfather or father?”

“Something…something so nonsensical could never be true.”

He made that very clear, so she used his words and tone against him.

“Your grandfather had the ten-against-one Concept War and your father stood up against the world that contained the other ten worlds. And since you’re higher than either of them, there has to be something for you, doesn’t there? This world must contain a war of your own that you cannot win without getting serious.”

“Isn’t that the Leviathan Road?”

She smiled at that.

“Who was it that said that was only settling the past? That’s only something your grandfather and father left behind. Didn’t you say a while back that it was forced onto you? This isn’t what you were originally meant to do.”

Which meant…

“You’ll find something if you’re serious about it. In other words, as long as you hope for a stage on which to negotiate, fight, and do perverted things, you’re sure to find something on the same level as the Leviathan Road.”

“Did you slip an insult into the middle of that wonderful statement?”

…Did I? But I don’t remember saying anything inaccurate.

After he thought for a bit, he looked away from her and spoke.

“Will you…help me find that stage?”

She had long since known the answer to that question.

She nodded, grabbed his hand, and turned him toward her.

“Yes. I’m a little worried about the perverted part, though. …B-but it isn’t just me. If you’re serious about it, I think everyone will gather around you and help you.”

After all…

“All of those things you said they have? If you hadn’t been serious, they would have lost them or never gotten them in the first place. I never could have made my novel without you and I was only able to seriously pursue my past because you were with me. So helping you get serious is the same thing as improving the things we have.”

“You make me sound like a leader.”

“You’re the ruler of the universe, aren’t you? And a god too.”

“Oh? Are you finally willing to admit it?”

Sayama’s usual tone of voice was back.

…Ah.

Shinjou looked over and found him looking at her. His expression was much calmer and more peaceful than before.

She returned his gaze and realized the same expression appeared on her own face.

“Are you feeling better? You don’t need to worry, Sayama-kun. You may not have noticed it yourself, but when you get serious, people gather around you and accomplish something. Something very, very big. If not…I never would have written about you.”

She nodded as she spoke.

She plainly explained the source of the confidence allowing her to push him forward like this.

“I was the first one touched by your serious side and I gained the most from it, so I should know.”

“Then,” he said. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Anything. It’ll be fine whatever you do. But for the moment…let’s make sure the world can continue on.”

She took a breath.

“After that, you can look at the world and decide how you want it to be. And if you’re serious about it, then we’ll help you. Once you get serious, you never give up and you do everything you can to accomplish whatever it is, so it’ll be worth helping.”

“Then I will undoubtedly end up the ruler of the entire world.”

He sounded somewhat amused but also somehow serious.

Finally, a bit of a smile escaped to his lips and he nodded.

“Thank you, Shinjou-kun. …You are right. I thought what I had inherited was everything, so I may have forgotten to search for what comes after that. I thought I had nothing, so I did not even notice I had forgotten *that I only have to try to find something for myself*.”

He suddenly added one more thing as if to sum it all up.

“So let us end it all.”

“Eh?”

“I will end what I have inherited and find my own battle within the fights and negotiations beyond that. …I will find something I can only find if I am serious. I will find my own Leviathan Road that requires the help of many people. And I will find it as many times as it takes. Yes…if my father and grandfather destroyed eleven worlds, then I will find even more battles than that. And…”

Shinjou heard him sigh. It was a sigh of relief.

“At the very end, I suppose the two of us shall become gods.”

“Wait.”

“Wh-why are you stopping me? Isn’t that the most natural plan for our future?”

The idiot next to her blatantly feigned confusion and looked up at her in surprise.

“Or are you saying you have already walked down that path as you are already a butt god!?”

“No, that isn’t it. Um…”

She thought for a moment but then changed her mind.

…Since he’s back to his usual self, is it over now?

She doubted he was going to speak his heart anymore for the moment. Someday, at the end of some major incident, he might tell her more about what they had discussed.

But she was also happy he had said “the two of us”.

“I really am glad I’m alive…and that I’m with you.”

“So am I. It is so early in the morning and I have already gotten so many wonderful birthday presents. First I was reunited with you, then we confirmed each other’s presence, and…”

He continued.

“You helped me realize what I should do from now on.”

The emotion she felt in his tone filled her yet again with surprise.

She was surprised that he had been so worried about what would come after the Leviathan Road.

…He seems so almighty, but he’s actually pretty withdrawn in some ways.

He had the ability to wish for so very much, but he would hesitate because he did not know whether he should wish for it. That was especially true when it would involve other people.

No one else knows about this side of him, she thought. *I hope I can learn even more about this side of him.*

He looked at her and tilted his head a little.

“By the way, how did you get here? The door was locked when I got here, so what exactly happened? Add in what happened to the others, and there are so many questions left.”

He could not find an answer to any of those questions, but Shinjou smiled with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

“I can’t say anything about the others.”

After seeming to think about what she meant, he asked another question.

“Then do you know how you got here?”

She had a single answer.

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “I do.”

●

Sayama saw Shinjou nod while sitting on his suit.

“I figured it out earlier. Can you look by the pillow?”

He did as he was told.

The suit and books were scattered around by the pillow, but he moved them out of the way.

He turned his back on her and prepared to remove the suit.

“Oh, you left a bite mark on my suit.”

“W-wah! I-I’ll pay for it, so forgive me!”

“It cost about seven hundred thousand, you know?”

She fell silent for a while before answering.

“Can I take out a thirty year loan for it?”

“Are you planning to buy a house?”

He smiled bitterly and dug down toward the bed. It was too dark to see what was there, but he could feel something small. They only felt like scraps.

“Straw?”

Only after asking did he realize what it meant. There was someone in Japanese UCAT who carried around a straw item.

“Sf-kun? It is true she could unlock and relock the door without the key.”

“Yes.” Shinjou gave a weak nod and presented more evidence. “You said before that something fired from below UCAT, right? Itaru-san knew what was

down there, so I think it must have been him. But if so…that means Sf-san left him to take me here. And…”

And…

“What about the others? She might have only taken me away.”

They could not even contact Ooshiro at the moment.

The worry in Shinjou’s voice came from her understanding of the current situation.

So Sayama looked back to tell her it would be okay.

“Shinjou-kun?”

He found her standing on her knees in the center of the bed.

Without bothering to hide the unease on her face, she exposed her shirt-wearing form to the dark blue light coming from the window.

“Can you keep me from being afraid?”

She had tied back her hair at some point.

She had used his red necktie instead of her usual ribbon.

But even with her hair tied back, she lightly grabbed the bottom of her shirt.

“Um…? I changed earlier.”

Lifting the shirt a little did not reveal Sadame’s body.

She lowered her head and blushed, but her eyes looked directly to Sayama.

“Will you…check on me to the very end? And will you keep me from being afraid?”

He knew exactly how to answer her. First, he nodded.

“Do not worry.”

He moved toward her, took her hand, pulled her close, wrapped his arms around her, and held her tight.

“Let us both do so to keep away the fear, Shinjou-kun.”

●

Sayama loosely crossed his legs and placed Shinjou on his lap.

He stroked her shirt which fell from her shoulders and gathered around her waist.

When she looked back at him, he placed his lips on hers and touched her body.

He moved from her chest to her armpits and he lowered his fingers down her sides like her ribs were a musical instrument.

“Ah…”

He continued down from her sides.

He stuck his right hand below her shirt and wrapped his left arm around her body.

He spread his own legs a little to spread Shinjou’s legs on top of them.

“Wait, S-Sayama-kun. My stomach and below are defenseless.”

“If they were defended, I could do nothing. What would you have me do then?”

“You’re a poet in the most meaningless way.”

Sayama thought about that.

“Should I create a better mood?”

“What kind of mood?”

“The kind you like.”

She thought about that for a moment.

“Like what?”

“Video games.”

She thought even more on that and turned a smile his way.

“If you say you’re going to use the joystick and two buttons to enter rapid-fire mode, I really will hit you.”

“Ha ha ha. What are you talking about? We have to start by inserting a coin and pressing the start button.”

“What is that supposed to represent!?”

She protested, so he was not sure what to do.

Creating the proper mood was quite difficult.

But it was also fun, so he thought as hard as he could and finally found a good idea.

“Now, to begin with…”

“No.”

“You certainly are hasty.”

“Yeah, I know things are most dangerous when you pretend to actually think about it. It’s best to hit the cancel button immediately.”

“What on earth are you talking about? I was only going to advise that we release your extra ships to lower the difficulty.”

“What if you miscount the number of extra ships and get game over! I’ll turn off the game!”

But Sayama shook his head because he already had a solution.

“If that happens, I will insert another coin for a continue.”

“I prefer to win on a single coin, even at home.”

“In other words, you prefer to play this game outside in the arcade?”

Shinjou slowly turned toward him with a smile.

“If you say it’s a reverse-import from the home version that uses a 360 degree rotating machine, I’ll hit you.”

“Ha ha ha. I am perfectly fine playing the crane game.”

He touched her and she trembled a bit.

“Ah… S-stop. If you touch me like that, I’ll…”

“Hmm. It seems my machine has a weak arm. I need to grab on better!”

“What exactly are you treating as the prize!?”

But as she trembled, he lay back on the bed.

That caused her to lean back on top of him.

He kept his arms around her on either side and he further spread the legs bent under her.

“S-stop. The bottom of my shirt is pulling up. You can see everything below my navel…”

“Not to worry, Shinjou-kun. Just a little further.”

“Just a little further and what?”

“We will earn a full power up for your normal shot. Would you like a beam?”

“Stop that!!”

…Strange. I thought she liked video games.

I wonder why, he thought before realizing the answer.

Is it because this is a shooting game?

“In other words, your weak punch is about to become an unbeatable super dragon fist.”

“Y-you don’t have to talk anymore.”

And so he fell silent.

He touched her in silence.

He rubbed her in silence and he moved in silence.

“Ah, w-wait. Sayama-kun. No, not without saying anything!”

“You tell me to stay quiet, but then you are mean to me when I stay quiet?”

“S-sorry, so, um…”

“Or should I do what you did before? Accept it all with my mouth?”

“N-no. You’re not allowed to do that. Th-that’s for me to do.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Yes. That’s right. That’s how it works.”

“Understood.” Sayama nodded in understanding and spoke in his most charming voice. “At any rate, I think it is about time for you to launch your bomber.”

“Have you noticed that the bomber gauge just rapidly fell?”

“You really do have harsh ups and downs, don’t you?”

But despite what she said, her body seemed to be heating up. As he continued, a tremor ran through her body.

“Ah, u-um, Sayama-kun!? I-I…I’m not Sadame right now?”

“But you are still Shinjou-kun.”

He raised his right knee a little to further lift her hips.

“As long as it is you, nothing else matters.”

After he touched and rubbed her more strongly, she kissed him and her body shook.

“…”

●

The surging sensation left Shinjou.

…Ah.

She breathed out and her body sank into a deep sense of relief, but then Sayama touched her again.

“Ah, S-Sayama-kun. …I-I don’t get any invincibility after a death, so you’re going to use up all my extra lives!”

“Shinjou-kun, calm down.”

“R-really? We’re not doing that joke anymore?”

“No.” He nodded. “In my mind, we were playing best to three.”

“That’s the problem!?”

Meanwhile, she was lifted up. No, Sayama collapsed to the left below her and bent even further forward.

His momentum bent her forward with him.

He slipped his face and shoulder below her left cheek.

She was lying on his left arm and his left hand started touching her.

A moan escaped her lips and she bent further forward.

That was when his right hand touched her from behind.

She gave a start.

“U-um? Are you sure? Are you really sure? You aren’t going to regret this? Are you okay? Is your brain working properly?”

“Calm down, Shinjou-kun. I want to check on you, so of course I will be doing this.”

She hung her head at that and felt the heat in her face growing.

“It hasn’t even been a year since I met you, so…um…”

She tried to avoid the issue.

“We’re still in the warranty period, so you can keep going even if you find a manufacturing defect.”

“Not to worry, Shinjou-kun.”

“Really?” She asked

“Yes,” he confirmed. “Machines these days are guaranteed not to break for the first two years.”

“Don’t make it sound like I’m going to break in two years!”

“Ha ha ha. Then I will not hold back.”

She cried out but immediately suppressed her voice.

He checked her with both hands. He rubbed her and massaged her. She tried to bear with it and endure it, but he refused to stop.

She did not know what it meant when he stuck out his right middle finger, but she greedily brought her lips in close, wrapped her tongue around the finger, and licked it. She brought it into her mouth as if to swallow it just like she had done to him before.

After he rubbed his finger through her mouth and even along the back of her teeth, he pulled it out and slid it toward her back.

“Eh? I-in my butt?”

Before she could finish asking, his finger slipped inside.

It was so sudden that she gasped and tried to bear with it, but to his licked finger, it was only light resistance and there was no stopping it.

His finger made it past the gentle resistance and slipped on in as he varied the speed.

“Ah!”

By the time the sensation washed over her for the second time, she had lifted

her butt up high on the guidance of his finger.

Her face-down body was covered in sweat, she was gasping for breath, and her chest was pressed against the suit below her.

She removed the shirt wrapped around the back of her waist and threw it away.

“Ahn…”

After brushing her hair out of the way, she pulled a pillow close and embraced it below her chin.

She was on her knees with her waist lifted high, so she tried to look back.

“Ah, w-wait, Sayama-kun! Don’t kiss my butt!”

“I am only doing the same thing I did to Sadame-kun.”

He treated it the same way.

Brief cries kept escaping her and she brought her knees together to fight it, but it was no use.

Her skin was damp with sweat and a finger or tongue could warmly slip past it even if she pressed that skin together.

“N-no, Sayama-kun. It’s going inside!”

Aiming for the instant she relaxed her strength, he spread her legs again.

She could feel the wet finger and tongue deep inside her, but she decided to give herself over to it.

That was when she noticed his face between her legs.

“Ah.”

He turned to the side and gently bit her.

What he had done and the slight pain it gave her caused her to lose control.

As a tremor ran through her, everything she had been holding back spilled out and was caught in a third handkerchief.

A “hyah” escaped her and her body went limp.

“D-don’t do that…”

“Hm. That seemed a little too powerful. I need to remember that as a surefire strategy.”

She kicked him.

She seemed to have hit him in the solar plexus so she turned toward his slight painful groan.

“You need to watch out for the boss character’s motionless attacks, okay? Honestly.”

“I-I am glad to see you are the same as always.”

After he caught his breath, he continued.

終わりのクロニクル

“Will you…show me?”

After a pause, she responded.

“Yes.”

She lifted her butt back up, exposed everything to him, and let a warm breath escape her lungs.

“What do you think?”

He got back up, looked at her, and answered.

“You are eroundic, Shinjou-kun.”

“You’re saying that again?”

She smiled a little and spread her knees some more to see him between them.

“W-will everything work out? Will we be able to make a baby?”

“If so, I will have only one thing to say: congratulations.”

Hearing that, bitterness filled her smile and she held the pillow close while still looking at Sayama.

“Then…you can do it.”

“I can check on you?”

“Yes. …Will you?”

She narrowed her eyes.

“I never even dreamed that someone would check on me to the very end.”

“This is not a dream. It is all real. After all, it was in your novel, too.”

That made her sweat even more and the heat reached her ears.

“Th-th-th-th-th-th-that was, u-um, uh, just me writing what I thought would make the best story.”

“No, Shinjou-kun. That is not what you should say here.”

She then remembered what the novel’s heroine had said at the end of this sort of scene.

“Right.”

She altered the line she had written for her purposes.

“Here, this is my…this is Setsu’s birthday present for you.”

She bent her waist and lifted her defenselessness for him to see.

“And in exchange, will you let me check on you to the very, very end as your present to me?”

“Yes, I will give you myself as a present while I take you as one. All of you.”

As if to show his agreement, he made her words a reality.

His fingers dug into her skin as he held her into place. After that sensation confirmed his presence, the two of them checked on each other.

They did so slowly but thoroughly.

●

Shinjou was dreaming.

Her sleeping body felt the warmth and strength of his hands, so she knew this was a dozing dream.

The dream was made of the color white.

White light filled the place and a glowing pillar rose into the sky.

She looked up toward the heavens and saw a giant object on its side like a white cloud.

The pillar of light before her was in the center, but there were four more pillars in the four corners of the heavens.

…Huh?

When she looked down, she realized two things.

Her vision was situated lower than it normally was and someone was sitting in front of her.

It was her mother wearing white.

She had some gray in her hair and she had grown a little thin.

She sat on a clump of sand that looked like stone and she was out of breath, but she was smiling toward Shinjou.

Shinjou realized her mother could no longer walk.

And she realized something else too.

…This is the past.

It was when Top-Gear had been destroyed and when she had left her mother.

She sensed someone on either side of her. They were likely Sayama's parents.

But, she thought.

…Baku isn't here today.

She was only sleeping next to Sayama, yet she was having a dream of the past.

…Oh, this is one of my forgotten memories, isn't it?

So she watched these events of the past, of her and her mother.

"Mom."

Her past self, not even half her current age, spoke.

"Let's go together!"

Her younger self pleaded, but her mother shook her head while still smiling.

She wants to go, understood Shinjou. *But she can't.*

But her younger self did not understand. She ran the short distance to her mother and pulled on her hand.

"Let's go! Let's go!!"

Still, her mother did not move and could not move.

"…"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her mother hang her head and shed some tears.

Her younger vision was soon filled by her mother's chest.

Her mother had hugged her.

Her younger self hugged back.

Yes, she thought. *I must have known what I wanted couldn't happen.*

Even so, the younger Shinjou raised her crying voice. She breathed in and spoke weakly.

"Let's go! I won't be picky anymore! I'll go to sleep at my bedtime! I won't say

it’s your fault when dad doesn’t come home at night and I won’t cry about my body. I’ll be good! I’ll always be good from now on, so…”

She raised her voice.

“Let’s go!”

Her mother said nothing and only squeezed her tight.

As if to accept her child’s tears, she breathed heavily which shook her body and finally…

“Satsu-chan?”

“…?”

Her mother breathed in but could not catch her breath properly. Still, the younger Shinjou heard her speak.

“Do you care for your mother?”

“Yes! I do,” she said. “Y’know what? You know the clothes you made for me before? I said they weren’t like the ones the boys wore at kindergarten and I tore them apart and I said I didn’t like them, but I was actually so…so happy I got them… When you made me new clothes, I couldn’t say I liked the old ones better and I really wanted to cry…and I said I didn’t like them, but…”

“Yes.” Her mother nodded. “I understand. You really liked that white dress, didn’t you? …You were just embarrassed and thought you had to do that in front of the others, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” The younger Shinjou nodded. “Also, when we got in a fight when I knocked over that cup…I refused to eat the food you made.”

She breathed in.

“Make it again… I’ll eat it! I’ll really eat it this time! I’ll be good!”

Her mother did not respond. She only patted on her back to comfort her.

Yes, thought Shinjou *Hold onto her.*

…That will tell her how much you care and how much you love her.

“Satsu-chan.”

She heard her mother’s voice.

“Don’t worry. No matter how much you said you didn’t like us and got into fights with us, your dad and I both knew that you actually cared about us and loved us. We know you’re a good kid.”

“Really?”

“Really,” answered her mother. The woman breathed in and continued in a shaky voice. “Really. After all, you always called us mom and dad. …And those people you called mom and dad? We understand. Even if you say you don’t like what we give you, get into fights with us, or don’t eat what we fix for you, we know that deep down you remember and care about us and what we do for you.”

She took a breath.

“And we’re the same, you know? No matter what comes between us, we care about you and love you the most. You might get into fights with us, refuse to eat our food, and rip up or give back what we give you, but we really do understand that you care for us.”

Her mother nodded and Shinjou could feel the movement.

“It’s okay if you rip up your clothes. You were happy when you got them, weren’t you? And you usually eat all of the food we make, don’t you? I know that, so it’s okay. And before, you painted your nails to copy me and they made fun of you at kindergarten, didn’t they?”

“When I got home…I got mad at you…”

“That’s fine.”

“It is? Why? I said I hated you!”

“You know what? I’m happy just knowing you tried to copy me and that you’re with me. Just because they made fun of your painted nails doesn’t mean you don’t want to be like me anymore, it doesn’t mean you don’t want to be with me anymore, and it doesn’t mean you really do hate me, right?” She heard a bitter laugh.

“If your friends hadn’t made fun of you, you would have kept wearing that dress and painting your nails, right? And if you hadn’t spilled that water, you would have eaten that food, right? Your initial happiness would have stayed, right?”

“…Yes.”

“See? Then if nothing had happened, you would have still cared for us the same, right? It was only because of what happened that you got angry and said you hated me, but I know perfectly well that you wouldn’t grow to hate us over something like that. After all, you were so happy. Nothing anyone says can change what a good kid you are.”

“——————”

“There might be misunderstandings, but that isn’t enough to fool me. I’ve been watching you from the very beginning, so don’t worry. …I only stopped making that kind of clothing or painting your nails because I wanted you to be happy without being made fun of. That’s better, right?”

And…

“I know that you really were happy. But because you were made fun of and had those misunderstandings, I did some studying and chose a method that wouldn’t let that happen. So I made those new clothes for you just like I made that dress. …I didn’t think the old one was better.”

“But…I liked the first one better…”

“I see.” Her mother laughed and lightly patted her back. “Then from now on you can choose to wear that kind. It was a white dress with a red necktie, wasn’t it? If you can wear that and hold your head high even if someone makes fun of you, then I’ll be glad I made that dress. …I’ll know you really care about the clothing I made for you.”

“…Really?”

“Yes. I know. We like a lot of the same things.”

Her mother embraced her long hair and brushed her hands through it.

“Yes, you are a lot like your mother. Like your hair. And…”

And…

“That song.”

“Yes.”

Her mother lightly patted her back.

She hugged her as if to tell her this was the last time.

Her younger self breathed in and her embracing arms practically clung to her mother.

Their breathing aligned and they nodded.

“Satsu-chan?”

“What?”

They both moved a bit apart and looked each other in the eye from close range.

“You don’t have to copy me even when I cry.”

“You copied me!”

“I guess you win this round.”

Her mother smiled bitterly. She briefly glanced at the two behind Shinjou but immediately turned back.

“No matter what happens from now on, you can trust in one thing. And if you remember anything bad you did to us or you want to tell us something when we’re not there, you can trust in this one thing. You can trust that we will always care for you no matter what.”

She took a breath before continuing.

“And you can also trust that no matter what you do, we’ll always be on your side. We will never betray you.”

“…Really?”

“Yes.”

When her mother narrowed her eyes in a smile, some tears spilled out.

“If you trust in that, you will always be able to reach us even if we’re not with you.”

So…

“Go, Satsu-chan.”

“But!”

“Don’t worry,” said her mother. “Eventually, you’ll find someone other than us you care for. You’ll find someone who you can trust will always care for you and love you no matter what you say and even if you act like you hate them.”

“N-no, I won’t! I have this body…and everyone always makes fun of me!”

“You will.” Her mother gave her another light hug. “I did and your dad did, and that’s why you were born.”

“…Really?”

“Really. So trust that our feelings for each other will never change no matter what, that we’re always listening to your voice, that we’re always rooting for you even if you can’t see us, and…”

She breathed in, moved away, and smiled.

“That you will be like us one day.”

“Will I…? Really!?”

“You will. I’m sure there’s someone waiting for you that will care for you just like we do.”

“Will that person-…?”

“They will not make fun of you. Even if you try to pull away, they will tell you that you are wrong, they will support you, they will always be by your side, and they will accept you in your entirety. And you will want to support them, too.”

She nodded.

“You can go now, can’t you? No matter where you go, we’re watching over you. Even if you can’t meet us, we know what you’re thinking. But if you do want an answer…”

She placed a hand on her chest.

“Remember that song. That special song we sing to celebrate.”

“Silent Night?”

“Yes. You remember that song I taught you, don’t you? …When you remember that, you will be singing with me in your heart. And when you do that, you will be with me.”

And…

“That song will lead you to your own precious person.”

Her mother said she was going to sing.

“Don’t forget. This song is the proof of our connection. The song I taught you is inside you, so even if I’m not with you, you still have proof that we’re connected.”

“Really?”

“It’s the song I taught you, isn’t it? Even if I’m not there, it won’t disappear, will it?”

“You’ll be inside me…telling me you’re there?”

“Yes.” Her mother moved completely away and placed her hands on Shinjou’s shoulders. “Don’t worry. When you sing it, we’ll be with you. Even if we’re not there, we won’t disappear and we’ll sing with you.”

“Right.…”

“So if anything happens, make sure to sing. When you’re happy, sad, angry, disheartened, or want to celebrate, just sing that song and we’ll be with you. We’ll rejoice with you, cry with you…or just be by your side.”

So…

“Tell us all sorts of things, okay? Tell us what you’re doing and what you’re thinking. And…if you find someone you care for, sing to tell us. Tell us the holy child has found someone they love and care for. Make sure to tell us you’ve found someone who will be with you like we are. …When you do that, we’ll be happiest of all.”

“You’ll be happy?”

“Yes. You’ll have gone out and found someone on your own. You had us with

you from the start, but this will be someone you chose yourself and let hear your song.”

“If I find someone like that, will you and dad celebrate?”

“Yes. We’ll sing with you. …And I’m sure that precious person will celebrate with us.”

When younger Shinjou nodded, her mother straightened her back and opened her mouth.

“Okay, Satsu-chan, it’s time to sing.”

“…Wait.”

Her younger self spoke to her mother.

“I’ll definitely, definitely see you again, won’t I?”

“Yes. If you trust in us and search for us, you should realize that we’ll always be together.”

Her younger self did not understand what that meant, but she still nodded and trusted it.

“Then sing, mom. I’ll listen…I’ll listen while I go. So…so don’t stop, okay? Make sure…make sure you keep singing!”

“Of course.”

Her mother nodded again and opened her mouth. Her younger self opened her mouth, too.

“—————”

They sang.

As the destructive light grew stronger, her younger self followed her mother’s lead and began to sing.

They sang the first verse. By the time they sang the second verse, she could hear other voices behind her.

The two behind her were both awkwardly joining in the best they could.

Her mother briefly stopped singing and spoke to the younger Shinjou.

“Those people will take you with them. They will take you to the world of my song.”

“Really?”

She looked back and the two brightly backlit people nodded.

“Mom,” she said. “Thank you. I love you.”

“Thank you too, Satsu-chan. And I love you too.”

They both smiled, shed tears, and wiped the tears away.

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep singing forever. Even if you can’t hear me, I’ll definitely be singing in your heart. If you’re ever feeling hopeless, just remember that and sing with me.”

After hearing that, her younger self moved back and began walking.

Her mother looked to her and resumed singing. She nodded and heard the song even as she moved away.

Oh, thought Shinjou. *My mom is inside this song.*

As long as she could hear the song, her mother was there and watching over

her.

If she sang the song, her mother would be with her.

As she ran, she could only hear the voice.

She looked back and saw her mother was indeed looking at her.

…Thank you.

She could hear the song. She was running. When she looked back, her mother was looking at her. Her mother was waving at her while singing. Her mother was probably waving at her even when she did not look back.

She was glad she had looked back, but it would have been fine even if she had not.

"Do not worry," said the man running alongside her. "You will definitely meet your mother and father again."

That's right, she agreed. *The fact that this world exists means my parents and I are always together. I can be with them by singing.*

As she ran and looked back, her mother grew more distant and eventually could not be seen beyond the light.

She almost stopped running once her mother was out of sight, but something pushed her onward.

It was a song.

She could hear the song. She could always hear it as if it remained in her ears.

The song pushed her toward the world where she could meet her parents again and where someone even more important awaited her.

Would that person be with her? If she wore the kind of clothes she liked and painted her nails, would they say it looked good on her? Even if she got into fights with them, said she hated them, or rejected what they gave her, would they trust that she actually cared for and loved them?

If she copied her mother and cooked for them, would they eat it like her father did for her mother?

If she ever stumbled or cried, would they tell her she was wrong, tell her it would be okay, and support her?

And would she want to support them and be with them?

…I want to see them.

Her parents would always be with her and there was no need to check on anything there, so she was perfectly fine. But even so, she wanted to meet that precious person.

She wanted to sing with the person who would listen to her song.

That song.

Even if she could not hear her mother's voice, the song her mother had taught her would remain inside her.

This is what told me this, she thought.

…It told me everything will be fine whether I look back or not.

They both understood everything they wanted to say, so everything would be

fine even if they were apart.

At the moment, she heard her mother's actual voice.

Yes, she thought again. *My mom's voice is definitely in this song.*

In her memories, whenever she had remembered the one song that had stayed with her, she had heard a voice not her own.

She had always thought it was her own voice.

…But it wasn't.

The voice providing the lyrics ahead of time when she sang had been her mother's.

She traveled to Top-Gear, met my dad, and sent me away, but she's always stayed with me in this song and she makes sure I hear her whenever something happens.

Shinjou remembered how she had constantly sung this song.

Whenever she had felt alone, lonely, or sad, she had sung it.

…But that was what I promised my mom. I promised to tell her whenever something happened.

White light filled her dream.

She could not tell if the world was ending or if the dream was ending, but she still heard the singing voice she had inherited from her mother.

That song proved they were together.

No matter what happened, her parents would be on her side and they understood she cared for them no matter what she might say or do. Even if they were no longer there or she wanted to apologize for something, it would all be okay and she could rest easy because they understood without being told.

This song of absolute relief contained her parents' wills. She had inherited it and it stayed with her.

What would happen if she sang that song and tried to reach someone with it?

…Would it get through to them?

Would they know that she wanted to be with them?

And she had indeed sung that song when she met that precious person.

…Did he understand?

She had sung for the boy who had saved her and borrowed her lap in that Okutama forest.

A month and a half before, he had come to meet her after being delayed by nine years and two minutes.

When he had saved her again, she had lent him her lap again and sang for him again.

Had that reached her parents as her mother had promised?

Had they heard that she had met someone she cared for just as they had hoped? And in a white dress no less?

…Yes.

It was because she knew they cared that she could leave her parents without issue, but then she had continued on so she could be with the person she had

come to care for on her own.

I'm so spoiled, she thought. *I already have parents who say they care for me and watch over me, but I still chose someone else I care for and he responded to my feelings.*

How spoiled can I be?

They had held hands and sent their thoughts to her parents in front of the shrine at the Tamiya house, but she now knew her thoughts had been reaching them long before that.

…Thank goodness.

She then spoke to the mother who had seen her off with a song, the parents still watching over her, and the precious person who was by her side now.

"Thank you."

She held a hand in her own.

Just before waking, she held the hand of the precious person she had chosen herself.

She held it tight and refused to let go.

●

The morning sun began to rise.

It rose in the east and sent shadows stretching across the streets.

But those shadows were thinner in one place.

There were long runways there.

Those runways were in Yokota Air Base of Fussa in western Tokyo.

Inside the concept space, the eastern three thousand meter runway was being used while the secondary runways to the west and north were not in use.

In the hangar beside the runways, the maintenance and modification of mechanical dragons and fighters continued at a quick pace.

Even in the cold air, the light of welding and the sounds of drills continued without rest.

A bus arrived.

The base was large, so the bus carried personnel around.

Most of those disembarking in front of the hangar were a new shift of workers who were working throughout the night.

Those men in blue work uniforms exchanged greetings while some continued with the leftover work, others exchanged information to pass the work off to the new shift, and others ran off to grab some materials.

A worker from the morning shift approached the storage building next to the hangar.

He had to get a forklift to carry the special-ordered parts of a mechanical dragon.

He started toward the parking hangar alongside the secondary runway, thinking his favorite forklift was there.

On the way, he met a member of the group who had been working through the

night.

"Hey," he said in greeting. "I hear things are getting tough. Can we still not reach the colonel and the others?"

"No," replied the colleague as he adjusted his work hat. "Same with the major. The other higher ups are managing the coordination with the States for now, but with only a substitute commander, this place might as well be a parking lot."

"Do you think they're alive?"

"I'll bet you five bucks."

"On which side?"

The man thought before nodding.

"Do you know why no one's searching for the colonel, the major, or that German inspector?"

"Why not?"

"They put in for paid leave before heading to Japanese UCAT."

"Then this isn't a very good bet."

"No."

They both smiled bitterly.

"I'm sure they're alive."

"So am I. if they're not…what then? That Leviathan is apparently sitting there above Shinjuku. …They put me to sleep with a forced injection kiss when I wanted to join the attack last night, but that thing's Babel, right? There's nothing we can do without the colonel and the others."

He frowned as he spoke and the other man nodded.

"It'll be tough even for them. Apparently not even Concept Core weapons work on it."

"Then it's all over, isn't it? By tomorrow, they'll have created the positive concepts inside the Leviathan and the world will change, right?"

"That's why everyone's working so quickly."

"Can we fight it?"

He sounded doubtful and the other man tilted his head a bit while holding the brim of his work hat.

"I don't know. Or rather, I do know, but I don't want to know."

"…"

"But," he said. "We're still going to do it."

"Can you?"

"That's the wrong question. We're *going to* do it."

He patted his shoulder.

"You have good luck. You'll get to see it before even getting to work. …You'll understand just how frighteningly made this world is. Even if you try to run away, a faint bit of hope will follow you around and lure you into hell."

"Hm? What are you talking about?"

"It's simple," said the other man. "It's like the worst kind of woman. Even

when you know it’s hopeless, you still end up thinking it might work out.”

With that said, the man walked off.

The worker watched him leave but then sighed.

He recalled the gravity of the situation as explained over the base’s radio and he circled to the side of the hangar.

His heart was heavy.

If the Concept Core weapons did not work, the mechanical dragons they were working on would not work either.

“…”

Before getting to work, he thought about distracting himself by making a spinning turn with the forklift on the apron of the secondary runway.

He often played around like that when unpleasant things happened.

The world would change on the 25th. In that case, this might be his last chance to do this trick.

But he suddenly realized something.

…I’m pretty sure this isn’t that guy’s post.

Then why did he come from here? he wondered as he arrived on the side of the hangar.

He saw something there.

“What the heck?”

The secondary runway should have been there.

The runway was two thousand meters long, but that long strip of asphalt was gone.

A deep, two hundred meter mark was left in its place.

“Something tore up the entire runway?”

It was a canyon four hundred meters wide and over two kilometers long.

Some kind of powerful strike had burned the grass, melted the crust, and left its mark there.

“Oh, come on.”

He trembled from something other than the chilly morning air and let out a white breath.

“Now I can’t have any fun with the forklift.”

Chapter 18

“Feelings for a Voice”

Is it reality or imagination that has reached you?
Grasp the answer using your own point of view

●

A pair of footsteps ran up a staircase filled by the morning sun.

They came from a boy and a girl and they were accompanied by words.

“Kaku! C’mon! Hurry up! The bell is going to ring! It’s the last day of the year-end festival, so the student council can’t miss the homeroom roll call two days in a row.”

“Hey, now. Who was it that took forever getting changed in the dorm room? You or me?”

“Honestly.”

Kazami blushed, grabbed Izumo’s hand, and pulled him along.

She then looked to the top of the stairs.

“Hurry. This might be our last homeroom.”

“I’d rather it wasn’t.”

Both of them held large bags.

The bags contained V-Sw and G-Sp2.

Kazami rested G-Sp2’s bag on her shoulder as if to better feel the weight in her arm.

“Once homeroom is over, let’s meet up with the others and go to Yokota Air Base. We should be able to get some detailed information on the situation there.”

The loss of everyone in Japanese UCAT was still unconfirmed.

Would they find the answer or not?

The two of them had called Harakawa and the others, but no one else had known anything either. It did seem Shinjou was safe, so Kazami hoped to learn more about that and the safety of the others after meeting up with Sayama and the rest.

Yokota seemed to be the place closest to the center of it all, so they hoped to gather information there.

That was why they would go there after meeting the others.

“After confirming what happened, I want to build my resolve.”

Kazami’s comment put a bitter smile on Izumo’s face.

She looked at him as if to say “What’s that for?” and he responded with the bitter smile intact.

“I see you’re playing this by ear.”

“Yeah. Adlibbing can be useful off the stage as well.”

As she said that, they reached the stairway landing.

They faced the hallway lined with classrooms. As they began running, 8:30 arrived.

It was time for homeroom.

●

The classroom was filled with students.

Some were speaking and a few were standing, but most were seated.

Sayama and Shinjou were in their school uniforms as they heard the bell ring.

Shinjou sat in the back and looked to both the teacher's desk and the windowsill.

"Ooki-sensei and Harakawa-kun aren't here."

"Harakawa and Heo-kun are apparently on their way from Yokota. As for Ooki-sensei…who can say?"

Shinjou could not nod or shake her head to his question.

She said something else instead.

"I…hope she gets here."

She then reached out her left hand toward Sayama's seat on her left, took his right hand, and squeezed it.

He squeezed back.

They said nothing, but it was enough to calm her. So…

"Um, Sayama-kun?"

"What is it?"

"Once homeroom is over, let's leave the school. We can meet up with the others and go to Yokota Air Base."

"Yes," he replied. "I was thinking the same thing."

He squeezed her hand even tighter.

She glanced over and found him slowly looking across the classroom.

The class was waiting for homeroom.

All of their classmates were there.

In the seats toward the front, someone was silently looking forward with nothing to do.

Toward the hallway, someone was looking in a mirror and fixing her hair.

One was reading a book, one was listening to music, and one was chatting with someone in a nearby seat.

Sayama spoke quietly as he looked at them all.

"Everyone is fighting."

"Eh?"

Shinjou questioned what he said, but she received no response.

When he spoke, he mostly seemed to be confirming it with himself.

"I began the Leviathan Road because I wanted to get serious. But…as we discussed early this morning, it was probably only a matter of chance that the one thing I could get serious about was the Leviathan Road."

He looked around again.

"Shinjou-kun, you for example can get serious about writing your novel instead of the Leviathan Road."

"I-I'm serious about the Leviathan Road too, you know?"

Her quiet protest led him to nod without turning her way.

"That means you have two things you can get serious about."

He gave a small smile.

“I am glad I had something. And I will try to believe that I will find plenty more from here on. …And that is thanks to you.”

He maintained his smile and spoke so only she could hear.

“Everyone must be the same. They want to get serious, they fight, and they gain whatever it is. In that way, while there are differences in what exactly we do, the two of us are no different from everyone else.”

“——————”

He narrowed his eyes in a smile and finally turned that smile her way.

“And the same must be true of my other self.”

“Of Mikoku-san?”

“Yes,” he said. “She inherited so many feelings and an entire world and this is the first thing she has gotten serious over. Do you understand what that means? Even inside Babel, my other self hid her true plan from me and never revealed her serious side. …She lost someone important to her and even stored up the power of the philosopher’s stone created for that person, so no matter who opposes her, she will continue with her unavoidable revolution of the world.”

“You mean…?”

“She is incredibly serious. Noah-kun is a weapon and not a companion, so in truth, she is supported only by her own seriousness.”

Sayama looked down slightly and spoke quietly as if imagining the girl he spoke of.

“She currently stands at the leading edge of every world’s emotion of loss and she herself lost someone important to her. She has cornered herself in that position, so she has bet everything on a means of overturning that loss. And yet creating a world of rebirth will also reject herself as a member of the world of destruction.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“Beat some sense into her.”

His quiet declaration left Shinjou briefly dumbfounded and he closed his eyes.

“I am someone who lost some things yet did not lose some other things, but just like her, I too can get serious. That means we are the same. And I do not like her methods. I need no other reason to punch my other self.”

“Can you…win?”

“If I do not, then her seriousness will win out. That is not a bad thing. After all, that conclusion would surpass my own seriousness. That would be a conclusion I could trust. And that is why I will abandon any expectations telling me I have an overwhelming disadvantage or I might be unable to turn this around. Instead, I want to do everything I am capable of doing.”

After a pause, Shinjou finally smiled bitterly.

Sayama gave her a puzzled look and she squeezed his hand before responding.

“You really can be childish sometimes.”

“Yes. Even I must admit it is truly adorable how I feel the need to lick certain

things to see how they taste."

"That's not what I meant!!"

After checking to see if anyone else had heard that, Shinjou let her shoulders droop.

But without letting go of his hand, she added some inflection to her voice.

"I'll go with you, you know?"

"I was counting on it, Shinjou-kun. Let us go punch that idiot together."

He was expressionless, but she could sense a hint of a smile in it.

"And there are others who will help: Kazami, Izumo, the Hiba boy, Mikage-kun, Harakawa, and Heo-kun."

"There are others too: American UCAT, the Gears who agree with us, and the surviv-…"

She trailed off before saying "the survivors from Japanese UCAT".

She wondered what had happened to them.

Based on what she had heard of the Leviathan, she doubted the people they had mentioned were enough to put up a fight.

The enemy was much larger than a city and possessed the positive and negative powers of every Gear.

…Is there nothing we can do?

She decided not to ask that out loud and Sayama said nothing either.

This was the one incident he would not reassure her about.

She squeezed his hand again.

"The final battle is tomorrow, isn't it? How about we search for the others until then? And how about we gather people to fight with us?"

"I was thinking the same thing, Shinjou-kun." Sayama nodded. "Our opponent is large and serious, while we are small and serious. So it would be best if we could gather an equal amount of seriousness before facing them."

"Right." Shinjou nodded, squeezed his hand harder, and wondered if it was hopeless. "Let's do everything we can."

As she spoke, she looked to the empty teacher's desk.

Another sound then drew her attention.

"Eh?"

She heard static.

Everyone in the school recognized it because it always preceded the bell.

It pointed to a single fact.

"The final homeroom…"

It was beginning.

But the bell did not ring. Instead…

"——————"

She heard the white noise that preceded a school-wide announcement.

"What is this?"

As soon as she asked her question, a voice escaped every speaker in the school.

●

Sayama braced himself for what was coming and listened with Shinjou to the voice coming from the speaker.

He heard a man's voice.

"Everyone."

He recognized the voice.

"Ooshiro…Itaru?"

But, he wondered as the two of them exchanged a glance.

He gave a look of doubt and she gave a look of confusion.

"Did he…survive?"

Sayama's question was eloquently answered by the speaker.

It provided the representation of a will known as words.

●

"Everyone."

Kazami heard Itaru's voice speak the same word again.

Izumo frowned in the next seat over.

"Hold on… We're at school right now."

She understood that. She really did.

But she also had a thought.

…What is going on?

That thought became a desire to learn more and she lifted her gaze.

She looked to the speaker uttering the man's will.

Everyone around her was too confused to do anything.

Within the stillness, Kazami and Izumo listened to the voice continue.

"Everyone."

Itaru's voice began with the same word for the third time.

"The entirety of UCAT will now enter a state of emergency."

●

Hiba and Harakawa raced along the school's northern road with their partners riding along and they listened to the voice reaching them from the row of boy's dormitories.

"These orders are made with the full authority of Team Leviathan Supervisor Ooshiro Itaru," said the voice. "All UCAT members are to enter a state of emergency regarding the world."

●

Sayama squeezed back Shinjou's hand and listened to the scratchy voice reaching them through the speaker.

He made sure not to miss a single word or syllable.

"By the time you hear this, I doubt I will still be with you."

He heard a bitter laugh.

“Make sure to rejoice about that.”

And…

“You all stand at the end of the trend we created, so I’m sure all of you will stand up in my place.”

●

Heo placed her hands to her ears in the sidecar of Harakawa’s motorcycle.

She spread her hands to pick up the surrounding noise and the voice mixed into it all.

“It took sixty years to reach this point.”

There was a pause for a breath.

“It took ten years to change course here.”

●

Izumo listened.

Next to him, Kazami sank low in her desk, so he could tell she was focusing.

He feigned apathy, but as he rested his head on his hand, he kept his ear pointed toward the speaker.

“The ephemeral justice.”

Izumo muttered the same words.

“The compassionate villain.”

●

Harakawa drove his motorcycle to the north of the school buildings.

He approached a gravel path which increased the risk of the motorcycle slipping, but he squeezed the accelerator regardless.

If he slowed down here, he might be too late for something.

“Not to mention,” said the voice. “The reason, the emotion, and the bonds and intentions those things led to.”

Some self-deprecation could be heard in the voice.

“All of those things will be gathered in this worst case scenario. As ridiculous as it seems.”

●

Shinjou felt the strength of Sayama’s hand.

She felt heat and a beating pulse there.

So she nodded and looked in the same direction as him: toward the speaker producing Itaru’s words.

Itaru’s voice continued as if to respond to her gaze.

“Gather your strength. Let your wills cry out. That is what is needed now.”

The voice breathed in.

“After all, the past – including the last sixty years and the Concept War – is

limited. If you wish for it, there will be much, much more to come. And you can only find it if you beat down the past and turn back toward it!”

●

“So at the very least…”

Mikage sank down in Hiba’s sidecar as she listened to the voice.

She looked up into the sky and saw no clouds there.

She felt like her soul could go anywhere today.

“At the very least, do not think of tomorrow as something that simply arrives.”

She heard what could be called a physical voice.

“Think of it as something you must take!”

●

Kazami listened to the voice of a man who had kept his distance from them for so long.

“Listen.”

She did so.

“If you are going to reach out your hand, then express your will. If you do that, you will be promised whatever it is you can grasp. So express yourself. There is only one response here.”

He continued immediately.

“Answer me! Will you or will you not continue on ahead and become the leading edge of it all!?”

Kazami just about responded to Itaru’s words.

She doubted the rest of her class knew what this announcement was about.

Still, she knew what it meant to answer that question and there was a single word she had to say.

To do so, she reached for the bag sitting next to her desk.

But something happened just before pulling G-Sp2 from the bag.

“Are you going to answer me or not!?”

Kazami saw and heard it.

All around her, as far as she could see or hear, every single student stood up, reached into their desks or bags, and noisily pulled weapons out.

“Testament!!”

●

Shinjou and Sayama heard it.

Before the two of them could do anything, the others stood up, lifted white cowling weapons, and raised their voices.

Tes, tes, tes.

We make our testament here.

They all said it, their weapons produced metallic sounds, and they laughed at what they were doing.

Those without a concept weapon on hand ran to their lockers and pulled them out.

Those with a concept weapon looked at each other's weapons with surprised looks of "you too?"

"What is going on?" asked Shinjou.

Everyone looked at everyone else and laughed awkwardly.

Shinjou realized she and Sayama were the only ones still seated and she heard rushing footsteps and voices all around.

She heard Sayama's voice next to her.

"Ha."

He spat out his breath.

"Ha ha!"

He laughed and stood.

He pulled on Shinjou's hand to have her stand as well.

Still confused, she stood, looked around, and saw the others turning back toward them.

She saw their eyebrows lifted in powerful smiles and she saw Sayama smile back in the same way.

They all held different weapons and noisily prepared them, so…

"…Right."

Shinjou nodded back at them with her confusion becoming a bitter smile.

The next thing she knew, she heard footsteps and joyous shouts coming from the hallway and other classrooms. The same commotion could be heard from the ceiling and floor, so the same thing was happening on the third and first floors.

The rumbling coming from the hallway likely came from movement in the neighboring school building.

They were all the same.

They all raised their respective weapons.

"We're all…together, aren't we?"

Once Shinjou said that, someone in a white track suit suddenly opened the door and entered the classroom.

"Ah, is homeroom over already?"

It was Ooki.

Everyone turned around with shouts of surprise as Ooki brushed down her slightly disheveled hair, raised her attendance book, and looked around the room.

"Um, I'll take attendance for the last homeroom of the year now."

After a moment, surprise filled her face.

"Wh-why do you all have concept weapons!?"

"It took you that long to notice!?"

Everyone's retort was soon followed by another question.

"Why are you alive!?"

"A-are you telling me to die!?"

“Wait,” said Sayama as he raised a hand to stop everyone and looked to Ooki. “Allow me sum it all up in a single question: where have you been, you tardy teacher?”

“Well….” Ooki scratched at her head. “Sf-san gave us an evacuation order straight from Itaru-san, so we all evacuated. But that took a lot of doing with 1st-Gear’s reservation and the 4th-Gear people.”

“Very good. All of that is acceptable. Continue.”

“Sayama-kun, are you making fun of me?”

“Of course not,” he replied. “I was praising you for having a proper explanation for once.”

“Yay! Sayama-kun praised me!”

Everyone gave her a look of shock, but she remained oblivious.

“Anyway, after we loaded the 1st-Gear reservation’s concept space creation device on a bicycle trailer and evacuated, it all blew up. And when we called for help, a whole bunch of police, firefighters, and JSDF showed up.”

“Ha ha ha. I suppose they would.”

“Right?”

Ooki gave a carefree bitter smile.

“Anyway, we couldn’t leave the concept space with all of them around, so we were stuck carrying the equipment all the way here.”

“I see, I see,” said Sayama as he nodded.

Shinjou realized he was going to say something soon, so she looked to Ooki.

But Ooki held her chest out proudly.

“I worked really hard. I clearly did a good job.”

“Yes, Ooki-sensei, you did work hard. You did a great job. …But I would like to ask why you never contacted us, you delinquent teacher. All of you have been missing since last night!”

“Eh?” Ooki frowned. “Was everyone worried? But Sibyl-san and Harakawa-kun’s mother were busy healing the wounded.”

“And what was a mere spectator like you doing?”

“Well… Odor-san and Diana-san said they were fine because they’d taken paid leave.”

“And why do you think you are on the same level as those inhuman people? And your paid leave has long since been used up thanks to your frequent tardiness, so do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“Um, well…”

It took five seconds, but Ooki finally found something to say.

“I’m sorry.”

Everyone sighed at her quiet apology.

“Well,” began someone as they all gave their thoughts at just about the same moment.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less of a superhuman that can coexist with roaches.”

“Who in the world let her be a teacher?”

“We’re never getting our final exams back, are we?”

“Wh-why are you all starting an anti-Ooki negative campaign!?”

“It’s not a negative campaign! We’re just telling the truth!!”

She flinched back from their unified response, but then Sayama sighed in her direction.

“Well, at least you are safe, Ooki-sensei. …Is your home okay?”

“It actually fell over.”

She sounded carefree, but everyone looked at her.

Shinjou knew that a tree spirit’s tree was equivalent to their own life.

…If it fell over, she must have taken a good bit of damage.

Shinjou glanced over at Sayama.

He nodded back, telling her to ask her question.

So she did just that.

“Are you okay, Ooki-sensei?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, I’m fine. The repair workers will fix the roots.”

Ooki was the same as ever. Or she seemed to be.

But then she scratched at her head.

“Although there is something I’m worried about.”

“Worried?” asked Shinjou. “If it’s something we can help with, just tell us.”

“Well…” Ooki kept scratching her head and slowly continued. “How should I put it? At the moment, I have no home, no clothes, and no money in the bank, so I was thinking of staying in the girl’s dorm for the time being. That would be fine, right? Right? It’s winter break. And once my home is standing again, I might like some volunteers to help fix all my toppled furniture. Also…”

Ooki continued with her true feelings on full display.

“I’d love it if someone could give their teacher a Christmas cake, a New Year’s meal, and a New Year’s gift.”

Shinjou and everyone else turned their back and ignored her, so Ooki raised her voice in protest.

That was when the courtyard grew noisy.

A shout came from outside the window.

Curious, Shinjou pulled on Sayama’s hand and ran to the window. She found a commotion leaving the courtyard and reaching the schoolyard.

“Everyone’s heading out!”

It went beyond that.

The group by the main gate was likely the people Ooki had brought. The UCAT members, Diana, the automatons, and the 4th-Gear residents were approaching the school buildings after leaving the concept space.

Everyone rushing out to greet them was a bearer of power.

That was why Shinjou squeezed Sayama’s hand.

“Let’s go with them! Let’s go to the power Itaru-san left for us!”

She and Sayama exchanged a look and a powerful nod.

“We can fight now. I’m sure of it!!”

She heard voices.

The voices no longer hid their strength and were confident that everyone was there.

Those voices never stopped reaching Shinjou’s ears.

●

A single person sat in the darkness while gathering and listening to the voices outside.

The broadcast room was a small room sticking out from the school building’s second floor.

The person sitting in front of the studio and mixer consoles and soaking in the joyous voices entering through the window was an automaton in a black maid outfit.

The letters “Sf” were stitched in the apron facing the window.

Sf looked to the tape recorder that was no longer running.

Its contents had already been released into the air.

“The will contained inside would deteriorate on a second playing.”

So she reached out and pulled the tape from the recorder.

She held it in her right hand and twisted her fingers.

“————”

She broke it.

Her gloved hand crushed and tore apart the wrapped magnetic tape and she tossed it aside.

“Itaru-sama.”

She held her hands to her chest.

She embraced the straw doll there, looked to the fingers that had destroyed the tape, and turned her eyes toward the scene visible out the window.

She observed the students and others in the courtyard as well as the concept weapons glittering in the sunlight.

“Itaru-sama…where are you now?”

She hugged the straw doll.

“You said you are everywhere, so you asked that I trust you. And you asked that I carry Shinjou-sama here. But…”

Her expressionless words continued.

“Where are you?”

The tape, the doll, and the voices outside were all things that would not have existed without Itaru, but…

“I am an automaton. I have no imagination. I trust you, Itaru-sama, but even though you said you are everywhere…where are you?”

Her plain words were not a question.

Her tone was one of confirmation.

And she used that tone to speak clearly.

“You are everywhere and nowhere, so…”

終わりのクロニクル

She reached a single conclusion because she could not perceive his existence.

“You must actually be nowhere, Itaru-sama.”

She kept her legs together and her posture impeccable as she spoke.

Her dignified voice joined the joyous ones coming from all around and below.

“My name is Sf. I am the automaton with the name Sein Frau. That means I am the automaton who exists for that purpose. Therefore, I am to be more than a maid. I am to bear metal for flesh, reality for imagination, absence for existence, rejection for desire, and even speech for silence. But…”

She closed her eyes.

“You are my only master, Itaru-sama. I have determined as such. You always refused to see me as a maid and instead treated me as Sf, but also acted as the bearer of my tears. I cannot cry, but you always took that role in silence. And your final request for me was to live.”

She gave an expressionless nod.

“Tes.”

She did not hesitate to continue.

“If that is what you wish.”

A moment later, she fulfilled her master’s request as she understood it.

She halted all of her functions.

She immediately came to a complete stop in order to immediately fulfill her master’s request.

Even in stopping, she proved her how well-made she was.

She shut down silently, with no shaking, defect, or excess heat.

As a doll, she stopped moving.

She simply remained seated with no perceivable expression on her face.

The reverberation of movement had completely left this doll.

●

Diana stared at the automaton that had become a mere doll.

“I’m starting to feel like my life is nothing but watching over people’s final moments.”

She walked down the broadcast room’s narrow corridor and moved behind what had been Sf.

Diana knew exactly what the doll’s expression would be.

“Expressionless, right?”

And…

“Sf, you were an excellent machine. After all…you lived as a machine.”

Diana gently embraced Sf’s neck from behind and hung her head.

Her lowered head hid her face behind her hair and that allowed her to ask her next question.

“Was being a machine what Itaru wanted? …Was it really? I happen to know the very first thing he said to you.”

Diana released a breath that could have been a laugh or a sob.

“He said ‘What is this? Is it supposed to be a replacement for someone?’, didn’t he?”

The doll said nothing, but Diana still spoke.

“You decided to remain a machine because you didn’t want to be someone’s replacement, didn’t you?”

She received no answer.

She only heard the voices from outside.

She heard the voices that had inherited the will Sf had carried here.

Sayama and the others loudly celebrated each other’s wellbeing now that they were reunited. Their loud voices proved that their wills were present.

They raised their voices as one.

“Testament!”

That was a word of agreement, a word of a contract, and a holy word.

Diana raised her head and looked to Sf’s face.

She found an expressionless face with closed eyes.

It was Sf’s uniquely sharp face that was never influenced by anything.

“Yes.” Diana nodded. “Sf, you continue relying on Itaru.”

As if to let her hear the many voices reaching them, Diana deeply embraced Sf from behind and turned her slender body toward the window.

As if to store her deep in her heart, Diana pulled the slender frame close and spoke with a faint tremor in her voice.

“You…”

She breathed in.

“You are an excellent machine that chose to rely on your master as the very reason for your existence.”

Chapter 19

“Simulated Tomorrow”

Everyone
How about we think of tomorrow?
Of a tomorrow bright with destruction

●

Evening filled the sky.

Below, the forest sank into darkness.

However, that forest did not maintain its proper form.

The tree-covered earth was split, cracked, and broken.

Ropes and warning lights were set up to block off what little remained of the road.

Night was fast approaching, so most of the trucks and heavy machinery had been pulled back to the base of the mountain.

But even as everyone else was headed down, one figure remained at the top of the slope.

An old man in a lab coat and a yellow hard hat stood on the broken asphalt.

His nametag said Ooshiro and his eyes were pointed downward.

He was looking at the valley filled with dirt.

The dirt piled up at the bottom of the valley was two hundred meters wide and several kilometers long. It also contained fragments of manmade objects.

They were asphalt and metal pieces melted by the heat as well as pieces of white building materials.

Those were the remains of Japanese UCAT.

Ooshiro stared at them in the shadows of the setting sun.

“#8-kun, you’re there, aren’t you?”

He suddenly spoke to someone behind him without turning around.

The air moved slightly and #8 stepped out from between the fallen trees behind him. She too was wearing a yellow hard hat.

●

#8 was wearing jeans and a down jacket instead of her usual maid outfit.

“What are you doing here, Ooshiro-sama? According to our estimations, the positive concepts will react to the activated negative concepts inside the Leviathan and change the world by midnight tomorrow night. To prevent that, the others have gathered at Yokota and Yokosuka and are holding a strategy meeting in Yokosuka’s underground meeting room.”

“And with all that going on, what does it look like I’m doing?”

#8 saw Ooshiro looking back toward her with the setting sun behind him and she slowly observed their surroundings.

All she saw were the setting sun and Ooshiro.

…Is this…?

After confirming the still scenery, she nodded and gave her conclusion.

“I believe you are mentally planning your next 18+ game.”

“A-are you really ignoring the sunset behind me, #8-kun!? Do I really look the same as always!?”

Hearing that, she wondered if she had made a mistake and looked into the

sunset again.

“The sun is merely setting for the night. What about it?”

“Wah! This is the problem with you! And when I was really setting the mood, too!?”

“Really?” asked #8 as Ooshiro wiggled in protest. “Testament. Then I will ignore that part. As an emotionless automaton, I cannot hope to guess what is going on.”

She then changed the subject.

“Anyway, everyone is worried about you, so please return to your post as soon as possible.”

“Eh? R-really? I’m the mega hero everyone’s pinning their hopes on?”

“Testament. Everyone in Yokota and Yokosuka was complaining about having no one to shove the unpleasant jobs onto, the construction workers were complaining about an old man getting in the way of everything, and I am complaining because I was called out here when I was supposed to be tuning my spare body. To statistically sum it all up, you need to get back there right away.”

“Th-that’s nothing like what you said before!”

Despite Ooshiro’s complaint, #8 pulled something from her pocket.

“This is the straw doll containing one of Itaru-sama’s hairs. Would this doll be an acceptable substitute for spending your time staring into the sunset?”

Ooshiro looked at the proffered doll.

“This was Sf-kun’s…”

“Testament. Sf-sama followed after Itaru-sama. …Because this doll is not Itaru-sama.”

#8’s tone of voice was firm.

“But you are not the same as Sf-sama. …You are technically human.”

“What do you mean ‘technically’?”

“I went out of the way to leave that unsaid, so why do you insist on nitpicking my wording?”

“I-I’m the one being scolded over this!?”

She ignored him because she had something to say. She had to say this before gaining even more bizarre conversational experience.

“Humans have an imagination. They have the power to imagine someone where nothing remains. So wouldn’t a doll containing something he left behind allow you to imagine him all the more?”

“#8-kun…”

“Yes.” She nodded. “All your pathetic brain can do is imagine things about dolls or an image on a monitor, but that will finally be a useful skill. Now, have a good time imagining.”

“I-I just imagined something really sad about myself!”

Still, he took the straw doll from her hand.

“But #8-kun? It sure would be nice to have something else to cheer me up.”

“Such as?”

“Like having you hug me and console me.”

“How exactly?”

“Calling me Kazuo-chan and hugging me as sweetly and softly as possible! Like the tenderest of simmered meats! Something that would need the sound effect ‘honyo’ or ‘huryo’! L-like this! This! Just like this!”

#8 stared at the old man backlit by the sunset as he made his sound effects and bent backwards again and again.

She wondered what to do for about three seconds, but finally said “testament” and nodded at the man. She then pulled her cellphone from her pocket.

“Hello, police? Yes, the pervert that I mentioned earlier is once again blathering on about bizarre nonsensical things while acting extremely suspiciously.”

“Wah, #8-kun! Stop, stop! And what do you mean ‘that I mentioned earlier’!?”

She hung up the phone and glared at Ooshiro.

“Have you made up your mind?”

“About what?”

“Will you be coming or not?”

She further clarified.

“Will you be giving up on or continuing the fight? Which will it be?”

He did not answer her.

He fell silent with the straw doll in hand.

So #8 determined what it was he wanted to say.

She opened her mouth to tell him.

“Testament. Then let’s go, Ooshiro-sama.”

“I-I’m going!? Don’t I get a say?”

“Since you did not answer immediately, I determined you were willing to go either way. And…”

She looked up into the clear sky as she spoke.

“We are in the mountains of Okutama at the end of December. The temperature will fall below zero at night. If you remain here, I have determined the frozen corpse of a pervert will be discovered here by tomorrow.”

“Well, I suppose that’s true.”

“You admit you’re a pervert!?”

“Damn, you’re strict!”

He wrapped his hands around his head and struck a pose, so she turned her back on him.

“You have to leave the mountain no matter what you choose, so your only option is to go. So I have determined there is only one thing to say: let’s go, Ooshiro-sama.”

“Ah, wait, wait!”

Ooshiro took a hesitant step after she began to walk.

“You’re pretty forceful.”

His shoulders drooped, but he followed her.

She looked back toward him.

“Are you coming with me?”

“Everyone wants me to, right?”

He pulled the helmet deep over his eyes.

“They’re hopeless without me, aren’t they?”

“Testament,” replied #8. “I have determined we are about to grow very busy. Prepare yourself.”

“I’ve been ready for ten years now.” His voice fell to the ground. “I thought I had prepared myself for this day back then.”

“You grow tired of things quickly, so I have determined you grew tired of being prepared.”

She suddenly sped up and he had to run to catch up.

“#-#8-kun! Why are you running away from me!?”

“I am not running away. Please stay at least five meters away from me.”

“I doubt I want to know, but why?”

“Testament.” She nodded. “A filthy old man carrying a straw doll approaching you from behind deep in the mountains? Are you trying to become a new urban legend?”

●

People filled a large space.

The bowl-shaped circular space was the meeting room below Yokosuka.

The room was completely filled with a great mixture of colors.

In addition to the representatives of the international UCATs, the national representatives accompanying them, and the Gear representatives, even volunteers from the normal members of those groups were present.

They all looked to the central space where a 3D image floated above a round table.

The transparent green light drew a 3D map of Tokyo with Shinjuku in the center.

“Tomorrow will be a day for the hidden annals of history.”

A boy in a suit, Sayama, spoke as he walked through the center of the large transparent map.

“This is the Final Concept War that will never be mentioned in the official history books. It will come down to a great urban battle in which a coalition force of UCAT, our various nations, and the Gears split into eight armies to attack the Leviathan.”

The Leviathan sat in midair like a giant island and red lights indicated the positions of the UCAT forces.

“According to our predictions, the positive concepts inside the Leviathan will be complete tomorrow, the 25th, at 10:30 PM. These positive concepts will react to the already activated negative concepts, but they will both fully activate and create the immortality concept at precisely midnight.”

In other words…

"At precisely midnight tomorrow, the world will be changed and the living will all be erased."

Everyone gulped at Sayama's words.

He then walked toward the image of the floating Leviathan and the eight red armies deployed in Tokyo moved toward the center.

The ribbon lines of movement had an arrow at the end. They split apart and covered Tokyo while approaching the Leviathan.

Sayama also reached a hand toward the Leviathan.

"If the Leviathan creates and activates the positive concepts, even the existing Concept Core weapons will be useless. After all, we have no idea how to defeat that colossal rampaging dragon," he explained. "But the Leviathan has left us a decisive opening."

Everyone looked up and Roger raised his hand in the American UCAT representative seat.

"What is this opening?"

"Until the positive concepts have been created, it must avoid moving as much as possible."

As he walked, Sayama pointed back toward the curled up Leviathan.

"If it could move, it could have easily destroyed the outside world already. It has not and it has overlooked us as we gather together, so I can only assume it is confident in its own strength and currently cannot move."

He took a breath.

"I know why. The Leviathan…no, Noah failed in its concept creation before, so it wants to be as careful as possible."

"In that case, is destroying the Leviathan not our primary goal?"

"Correct. Our goal is to prevent the Leviathan's positive concepts from reaching completion at 10:30. …I will now show you how."

Sayama turned toward everyone else. On the 360 degree transparent map, UCAT's red ribbons split apart and formed eight foundations.

"A representative bearing a Concept Core weapon will be placed in each of these eight directions. While holding those eight directions, a barrier wall will be created in each spot."

Eight walls appeared to surround the center of Tokyo.

"Oh?" said the Chinese UCAT representative.

The man in black crossed his arms with an impressed look.

"A Bagua-style omnidirectional barrier? It looks just like the Eight Great Dragon King barrier used when sealing 10th-Gear's Concept Core, though."

"Not quite. The sealing walls will be used to keep the Leviathan from escaping and the circle itself acts as a declaration of the Concept Cores' presence. In other words, we reject the creation of the Leviathan's positive concepts by *showing off the real ones*."

Sayama kept his legs moving.

“But that rejection must not have a way out,” warned the man. “A simple eight-direction seal is not enough.”

“Then…” Sayama came to a stop right below the Leviathan made of transparent light. “We do this.”

He waved a hand and red light appeared.

It appeared directly below and above the Leviathan.

Two red walls were displayed above and below the enemy dragon.

“We add two extra Great Dragon Kings to the Eight to install a seal above and below. The Leviathan will have nowhere left to run and we can lecture it from all directions using the presence of the real positive concepts.”

To put it another way…

“Yes, for simplicity, you could call it the ‘Leviathan, your positive concepts are fakes and are thus banned! Ha ha ha. How do you like that?’ barrier.”

“That’s a little too simple!!” shouted everyone else.

“Simple is best, don’t you think?” replied Sayama. “But if you insist, we can call it the Ten Great World Dragons barrier.”

A short pause followed.

After a few seconds, Roger raised his hand in the American representative seat again.

“Who will be in charge of the two great dragons in the heavens and on the earth?”

“Anyone will do. As long as they are worthy of bearing a Concept Core weapon, that is.”

“Anyone?”

“Yes.” Sayama looked across the approaching red ribbons of their armies. “It may be a rough way of looking at it, but the Concept Cores are worlds themselves. They contain elements of the heavens and earth within them. So if two of the Concept Core weapon bearers travelling in these eight armies – or two others on the same level – bring in the Concept Cores, they only need to set up the seals of heaven and earth once the eight-direction barrier is established. To put it another way…”

He took a breath.

“Those two will be trying to score a touchdown on the Leviathan.”

He raised a hand, said “but”, and looked across his audience.

His expressionless face silently observed them.

“But you are thinking this sounds simple, aren’t you? We can transport the Concept Core weapon bearers in with an aerial force, after all.”

Once he said that, a few numbers appeared in the air. They were formatted like a time and they displayed an estimated length of time.

“Based on the time needed for the barrier in Top-Gear’s Osaka and the barriers used to seal 10th-Gear’s and 2nd-Gear’s Concept Cores, we can estimate it will take this long to establish a barrier large enough to seal the Leviathan.”

The proper numbers appeared and everyone gasped.

“The eight-direction barrier will take sixty-four minutes. Counting from there, the heaven and earth one will take sixteen minutes. That makes a total of eighty minutes that we must face the Leviathan. By counting back from there, we know when we our attack must begin.”

Diana gave the answer from the German UCAT representative seat.

She gave the numbers with a serious look in her eyes.

“At the very least, it has to be eighty minutes before 10:30 tomorrow night. To give ourselves some breathing room, we need to attack by nine at night.”

“Exactly. And this is going to be quite troublesome.”

Sayama’s words brought the color blue to the map.

Blue ribbons appeared from the Leviathan.

It almost looked like the color blue had exploded from the dragon.

“The Leviathan contains a massive fighting force. Based on what I saw, its concept space hangars hold approximately two thousand five hundred gods of war of various types, one thousand mechanical dragons of various types, and as for automatons…”

He smiled bitterly.

“Approximately three hundred thousand of various types.”

A few people voiced their disbelief.

That simply seemed impossible.

That was when a sudden voice of rejection reached them. It was a sharp girl’s voice.

“You would not regret it if you showed a little more tolerance.”

The voice came from directly next to Sayama.

No one had seen them arrive, but two figures had joined the transparent map of Tokyo.

One wore a black armored uniform and the other was a twelve-winged maid automaton.

They were Mikoku and Noah.

●

Everyone in the meeting room began to raise their voices at their appearance.

Some reached into their pockets to pull out weapons, but they never completed that action.

“Please quiet down. Over.”

Noah’s voice seemed to be emitted from her entire body and a weight fell down from above.

It was a great burden.

“…!?”

Those who had started to stand up fell to their knees. Those who had reached into their pockets collapsed forward.

The weight bore down on their entire body.

But the cups and pens on the desks before them did not even budge and their clothes were not pulled down.

Only the people were pressed against the desks or the floor while Mikoku and Noah stood tall.

Noah had lightly raised her right hand.

“I have tripled your body weight. Please calm down, everyone. Over.”

But someone opposed those words and began to move.

Sayama stood in front of them and…

“Go!”

On his shout, two figures moved inside the meeting room.

The girl and boy moving quickly forward in their white armored uniforms were Kazami and Hiba.

Their movement time was shortened and they moved too quickly to see properly.

Kazami spread her wings and forced her way through the extra burden.

“!”

She circled behind Noah and thrust G-Sp2’s tip up from below without warning.

At the same time, Hiba rushed directly in front of Mikoku.

Kazami’s attack hit and the sound of the impact exploded out.

However, it hit Hiba.

“Eh!?”

The sound of everyone else gasping was louder than Kazami’s cry of surprise.

At some point, Noah had appeared behind Kazami with Mikoku in her arms.

“…!”

Kazami turned toward the presence behind her and Noah spoke expressionlessly.

“Please quiet down. Over.”

Hiba flew over their heads after being knocked into the air by G-Sp2.

He normally would have hit the tall ceiling from a blow like that, but the distance and height of his flight were shortened by his tripled body weight.

At this rate, he was going to crash into the third level of the stepped meeting room.

His arms flailed wildly, but there was nothing he could do.

His legs also flailed wildly, but there was still nothing he could do.

Kazami knew what to do at a time like this, so she gave him some advice.

“Hiba! It’s no use!”

“Y-you’re the one that did this to me!! You really are the worst!!”

However, he spotted someone to help him up ahead: Izumo.

Izumo was sitting in the stepped aisle between desks eating a hamburger, so Hiba shouted to him while flailing his limbs.

“I-Izumo-san!”

“Yeah…” Izumo nodded and averted his gaze. “It’s just that you’ve been making a lot of gay jokes lately.”

“Don’t give up like that! Try to have a proper conversation with me!”

Hiba braced for impact.

“Izumo-san! C-catch me! Please catch me! It might mean cracking a few bones, but l-let me plow into you!”

“It might mean cracking a few bones?”

Izumo gave a reluctant nod and went with Hiba’s suggestion.

He pointed at Hiba, held his sides like they were splitting, and spoke to the Kenyan UCAT representative sitting next to him.

“Hey, hey. Did you see that!? That idiot’s flying! Wa ha ha ha ha!”

Hiba crashed into the seat next to Izumo.

The sound of destruction was three times greater than normal.

Izumo spoke to Hiba’s legs and hands which were growing from the remains of the wooden desk and chair.

“Was that good enough? But if you want to ‘crack’ people up with your jokes, you can’t force them.”

Hiba shot to his feet, scattering pieces of the seat, and clenched his fist with blood flowing from his face.

“I-Izumo-san! There are some things you just don’t do!”

“And was this one of them?”

“U-um…”

Hiba hesitated, so Sayama shouted over at him.

“Was it!? Or was it not!? Give us a clear answer!”

Rushed by Sayama, Hiba held his head in his hands.

“I-it was…was not…was…”

He looked up in surprise, turned around, spread his arms, and gave his answer.

“It was not was!”

Noah was standing in front of him and she gave her response to his suggestion.

“Please quiet down. Over.”

“W-wah! Even the enemy’s treating me like this!?”

They all ignored him and Noah placed Mikoku back on the floor.

Mikoku took a breath, fixed her collar, and looked across the group in the room.

“Everyone, I am here to suggest you surrender.”

She expressionlessly looked through the transparent map of Tokyo surrounding her.

She looked at the red ribbons of UCAT and the blue ribbons moving toward them.

“To speed up your decision, I will provide you with some details concerning my weapons.”

●

Sayama fought the weight as he listened to Mikoku provide her numbers.

These were simply the numbers of her army, but…

“Mechanical dragons: 121 Seraph-type, 406 Cherubim-type, and 640 Galgalim-type. Gods of war: 301 Lords-type, 814 Virtues-type, and 1201 Power-type. Automatons: 98000 Prince-type, 10001 Arc type, and 189000 Angelus-type. Altogether, it is an army of more than three hundred thousand.”

Those simple numbers moved on the map of Tokyo as the color blue.

As everyone pinned to the desks or floor looked to the map, blue ribbons rose from the ground and began intercepting the red ribbons.

Sayama saw Mikoku instruct Noah to end the extra weight.

“Testament.”

With that word, the weight left them all and they breathed a sigh of relief.

No one around Sayama considered attacking Mikoku.

She must have understood that because Mikoku looked first to him and then the others.

“I have no intention of fighting yet. The Leviathan is always under my control. I can send out it and its troops as easily as you can clench your hand into a fist. Blindly attacking with no preparation will only lead to regret.”

“In other words, it is time for a chat straight out of the long-running TV show ‘Disastrous You’?”

Noah tilted her head, but Mikoku nodded and lowered her gaze a little.

“I doubt it will be a very nice chat.”

Someone chose to question that.

“I wouldn’t be so sure.”

It was Ooshiro who had entered the meeting room with #8.

People raised their voices to welcome him.

When he fixed his collar and raised his arms in an entrance pose, everyone smiled and applauded.

“Tch. Why’s he alive?”

“#8-san wasted four hours of her life bringing him back.”

“He bought up three or four of the limited-edition figurine I wanted.”

“I-is it just me or are all of you giving into personal grudges a lot lately!?”

“If you have something to say, get on with it, old man.”

“Very well.” He sat on the steps, pointed at Mikoku, and then pointed at the giant dragon on the map. “How should I put it? You may be able to use the Leviathan, but can you really utilize all of those weapons? It must take a lot to fire even a single cannon. Do you have any proof what you’re saying is-…”

Before he could finish, Mikoku snapped her fingers.

Noah nodded in response.

A moment later, everyone saw a building on the southeast side of the transparent map disappear.

Tokyo Tower had completely vanished.

As soon as the green, transparent tower disappeared, the automaton operating the round table controlling the map spoke quietly.

“The tower within the Leviathan’s concept space has been vaporized.”

“Testament.” Noah nodded. “The Leviathan is linked to me. I exist here as an automaton, but I am aware I am nothing but a weapon for Mikoku-sama. Over.”

“I see.” Sayama nodded and looked to Ooshiro. “Why are you even here, old man? It is your fault Tokyo Tower was destroyed inside the concept space.”

“Eh? I-it’s my fault!?”

“Ha ha ha. Who else could we possibly blame?”

Everyone in the meeting room glared at Ooshiro.

He shrieked, rolled along the floor, collided with the next step up, and rolled back to #8.

“#-#8-kun, are you going to give me the same look all of them do?”

She ignored him entirely, pulled a mop from below her apron, and began cleaning the floor with her back to him.

“#-#8-kun! Won’t you help me after going out of your way to bring me here!?”

“I apologize, but I am incredibly busy with nothing to do and am therefore cleaning.”

“How long will you be cleaning?”

Ooshiro asked while sitting on the floor and #8 answered with her back to him.

“Until the filth is gone.”

“Is that…a metaphor for something?”

“Testament. …Of course not.”

“Which is it!? Which of those answers am I supposed to believe!?”

“Ooshiro-sama.” She continued mopping with her back to him. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

He lay on the floor and pretended to cry, so everyone ignored him. Mikoku glanced over at Ooshiro.

“You are a strange bunch.”

“You’re one to talk!!”

Mikoku flinched back at everyone’s retort, so Noah supported her back and spoke expressionlessly.

“Mikoku-sama, do not let them bother you. What could they possibly be looking at to think we are strange? We are far too low-key for that. Over.”

“R-right. I am living such a low-key life that I had plain soba for lunch.”

“Since you would have been floating in the sky while eating it, that is a most impressive way of being low-key.”

Mikoku cleared her throat after hearing Sayama’s opinion.

She looked over at him and held out a hand to indicate the transparent map.

“Anyway, my army of automatons and gods of war has already been deployed

within the concept space. Every last one of them wears pure-white armor. Meanwhile, what kind of fighting force do you have?

Sayama responded.

“You already know, don’t you?” he began. “We have millions upon millions of fighters.”

“Let me be blunt. Are you stupid?”

“Heh heh heh. I can see you are shocked by the overwhelming vagueness of our army.”

Mikoku gave Noah a look of protest, so Noah held out her right hand and bent her fingers twice.

“Based on my predictions, they currently have seventy thousand in all. By nine tomorrow night, they will have two hundred and ten thousand. Over.”

“You need to learn to dream.”

“I have never had a dream. Over.”

“That is unfortunate.” Sayama crossed his arms. “Dreams are wonderful. Shinjou-kun will perform all sorts of acrobatic positions while only putting up a token resistance. Come to think of it, I can do that in reality now.”

“Waaaah!!”

The meeting room’s door burst open and a shouting form rushed in.

“Ah! W-wait! Why are you dragging me out! I have an objection! An objection!! I demand an appeal!!”

The figure was taken back outside.

Sayama glanced over at it.

“Would you look at that. The dream has appeared for real.”

“You need to check yourself into a hospital,” said Mikoku.

She crossed her arms and addressed the comparative numbers of the blue and red ribbons.

“Going by the numbers alone, my force is 1.5 times larger than yours.”

Add in the superior fighting power of the gods of war and mechanical dragons and the Leviathan had an overwhelming advantage. Gathering every god of war and mechanical dragon from every Gear would have trouble reaching even a tenth of the Leviathan’s numbers.

Mikoku must have realized that because she continued.

“Therefore, I suggest you surrender. You can do so simply by doing nothing.”

“Why?”

She answered expressionlessly.

“If you do nothing, you can enjoy Christmas night with your families. You would be happier if you made some nice memories before being erased in the instant of the new world’s creation. And just like me, you will be reborn in the new world in some form. If you do not like the sound of that, then this will be your fate.”

She pointed to the map where UCAT’s red ribbons were being devoured by the blue ones.

They were devoured rapidly and in great numbers.

The erasure of the red left everyone in the room speechless.

Could they stand up to that?

But Sayama was unfazed.

“I see.” He looked Mikoku in the eye. “You certainly are brave to suggest we surrender. A very bold move if you ask me.”

“How is this bold? Are you implying you have some chance of winning?”

“Allow me to ask this: Do you seriously think *you can defeat me?*”

Everyone gasped and Ooshiro shouted from the floor.

“M-Mikoto-kun! Don’t provoke her! That’s a big no-no!”

“There is nothing to worry about. We are merely chatting. For today, she will suggest we surrender and we will declare war. So let me make one thing very clear: We will stop the creation of the Leviathan’s positive concepts by 10:30 tomorrow night.”

“Can you? Even after seeing the result of the simulation surrounding you?”

The silence from everyone else grew heavier.

The reason for that silence was simple.

All red had vanished from the map of Tokyo in which Sayama stood and it was absolutely filled with blue ribbons instead.

If that simulation was accurate, every last member of UCAT would be devoured by the Leviathan’s army.

And Mikoku stood in the center of that blue battlefield.

“If all you have is pointless bragging, there is nothing left for you.”

But Sayama did not respond.

He said nothing. That was all.

They had already declared war against each other, so Mikoku looked down, closed her eyes, and hung her head.

“So all that remains is the battle. Understood.”

She sighed and raised her head without opening her eyes.

“Let us fight during tomorrow’s holy night. Let us fight with the entire world on the line.”

As soon as she said that, both she and Noah disappeared.

But they had not completely vanished.

“––––?”

They had lost their human forms.

With a sound much like sand, only a pile of something white remained where they had been.

When Kazami saw it, she frowned and spoke from the floor.

“Salt?”

“Yes,” agreed Sayama. “They were likely creating copies of themselves using gravitational control or something else. Such careful preparation and such overacting. I cannot believe they would force salt to cosplay as them. But…”

He moved his legs to enter the transparent map of Tokyo.

He moved below the Leviathan where Mikoku and Noah had been and stepped on the piles of salt.

“Was that supposed to be their declaration of war?”

No one answered him.

They all simply let tension fill their bodies.

So Sayama opened his mouth.

He let his words soak into them and remove their tension.

“That was an amusing little diversion. Now, let us get back on topic. I will give you my idea of how to escape this situation where Tokyo is filled by the blue ribbons.”

Everyone watched as he raised his hand.

In response, a flower bloomed in the blue Tokyo.

A few red forces suddenly welled up there.

There were not that many of them, but they were definitely there.

“I will now show you the battle as I see it. In other words, I will show you a battle of gods, where everyone is the same as me. And, everyone, I have only one thing to say here. There is only one objective to this plan I am calling Operation Leviathan.”

He spoke the words that were essentially a promise to the others.

“We must not allow the Leviathan to reach reality.”

●

The area around Shinjuku Station was filled with the lights of night.

According to the clock in front of the station, it was 4:22 AM.

There were people there, but not many. Some people in suits were arriving for the first train of the morning and some younger people and women who had spent the night in the area were moving between empty stores to keep out of the cold.

But there were a few people unlike them.

These men all wore work uniforms with matching blue jackets.

Large trucks were pulling up alongside them not just at the center of the taxi-filled roundabout in front of Shinjuku Station, but also in the alleyways by the south, west, and east entrances.

The trucks were loaded with metal pipes and panels.

“Who would have thought we’d be blocking off Shinjuku and building stages on the roads?”

That comment came from Kazami’s mother who stood in a small clearing in front of Nishiguchi Station.

She wore a coat and the man next to her, her husband, passed her a thermos of tea.

“It’s going to be blocked off from nine to midnight tonight. I’m impressed you got permission for this, papa.”

“Well, I’ve been planning this for a long time and I have some connections

here since we used the area a lot for a police drama I worked on. You know the one: 'Detective Fluke: The Activation' where he always found the criminal on intuition."

His wife smiled bitterly at that.

"I remember that. Chisato would always watch your shows back then. Like that popular anime."

"Oh, you mean the sexual harassment food hero 'Panpanman'? Chisato came up with a lot of the ideas for the pathogen monsters working for Gaikinman, the enemy boss who refused to work in the office. Choleraman and Aidsman were certainly straight to the point."

"That one got cancelled pretty quick, didn't it?"

A short silence followed his wife's comment.

Their daughter would normally keep the conversation going with a complaint, but she was not here and the father had to clear his throat.

"Well, ever since then, I've wanted to pretend to conquer Tokyo like this."

"Oh, my. So are you conquering it with music instead of police authority?"

"Ha ha." He laughed and smiled bitterly at his wife's words. "I wonder what Chisato would think if she knew her papa was going to be a dictator tonight?"

"She'd probably come to overthrow you and tell you to stop dreaming."

"Y-you sure are cement-like!!"

"Am I?" she replied.

Suddenly, a large figure approached them.

Kazami's father stood up when she saw the man wearing a jacket over a white suit.

"Oh, Izumo-san. Why are you here? D-don't tell me searched us out with psychic powers!?"

"That's exactly right! Esper Beam Beeeeeacon!!"

"Old Man Shield!! And Man Beam Birooooon!"

"What!? Shepaaaah!! …Oh, this is a paralyzing beam, okay?"

"Roger that. But… Ha ha ha. That won't work on me! Meyo meyo meyo meyo meyo!"

The mother removed a shoe and struck the father's head as he moved his arms in a wavelike motion and made a bizarre sound effect.

"Ow!"

He bent forward and she smiled his way.

"Why are you two posing at each other? I'll grab your collar and hit you next time?"

"Hmm, are you saying you're willing to hit just anyone, mama?"

"Anyway, enough of this nonsense only men can understand. Try talking like human beings."

"Sure, sure, sure." He straightened up and turned toward Izumo. "What brings you here so early in the morning?"

"I just have business in the area is all. But on the way, I heard something

interesting was going on here. I'm really not sure what to say about this."

Izumo Retsu looked around the nighttime station area and spotted the loaded trucks hidden in the alleyways.

"It looks like you're up to no good!!"

"Ha ha ha. I see you understand. You sure are young at heart, Izumo-san!"

"I understand all too well. It's like you're conquering Tokyo!"

Wondering how he could tell, Kazami's mother tilted her head and glared at them, but the two men paid her no heed and began discussing the location of the stage and the timing of the lights and sounds.

Suddenly, Izumo's father crossed his arms and smiled.

"I wish I could have helped out with all this."

"No, that would feel like we were abusing Chisato's connections."

"True enough."

The two men smiled bitterly.

"So what do you have planned, Kazami-san?"

"Nothing much. Just calling in artists from around the world and having them perform on different stages simultaneously for a ridiculously exciting Christmas. Walking around the streets of Shinjuku will feel like walking all around the world."

"Will your wife be singing?"

Kazami's mother gave her husband a quick look, so the man gave a single nod.

"I'm not so sure."

"Ah, what a shame! I have her LP, you know? The one where she adds that sound effect to the end. 'I'm. Still. Seventeen. Piyo-piyo'."

Kazami's mother shrieked, held her head in her hands, and crouched down.

Seeing the father frantically try to help her, Retsu scratched his head awkwardly.

"You were traumatized by that? My bad. Then what about after you started writing your own songs? Y'know, like 'No one will even look my way. I'm a sweet pea of a bygone era'?"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

Kazami's mother shook as violently as someone on the receiving end of an exorcism, but…

"I-Izumo-san, please stop hitting her past with these uppercuts!"

"Sorry about that."

Retsu gave an honest smile.

"No matter how it might look now, we all had fun at the time, so I don't see any reason to reject what happened back then."

"That's right. That's right, mama! Did you hear what Izumo-san just said!? 'No one has had as painful a life as me' was a really, really good song!"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow! Papa! You wrote that song!!"

The father looked up in surprise.

"That's right. That's the musical curse I wrote when I was so mad at my idiot

of a boss! I planned to send it to him, but I accidentally put it in your birthday card instead."

"Yes, and the card saying 'I want to be with you from morning to night (heart)' ended up going to your boss. Didn't he quit almost immediately after that?"

"Ha ha ha! And it was all thanks to you, mama!"

The mother hit his head with the thermos.

The empty thermos made a nice side, but by then, Retsu was already walking toward the station.

"Are you leaving already?"

"Yes." Retsu waved without turning around. "I'm looking forward to it. We're having a pretty serious festival too, so I hope we can enjoy the night together."

Chapter 20

“Just Before the Performance”

You continue on because you might as well
That is why you fail to realize its importance
And why it embarrasses you even if you do

●

It was December 25 and morning was coming to an end at Yokosuka Wharf.

American UCAT had an underground base there inside a concept space, but the area on the surface was currently being used as an anti-Leviathan transport relay base.

The base connected the forces coming from the American homeland and the large concept space surrounding the Leviathan.

A fifty kilometer tall concept space corridor had been created from Yokosuka to eastern Tokyo. Ships, fighters, and mechanical dragons would cut their stealth and enter that corridor.

They would then travel from Yokosuka to the eight locations surrounding the Leviathan.

They moved quickly and accurately.

However, this all created noise, so the wharf inside the concept space was constantly shaking.

A few figures could be seen inside the one special hangar in the wharf.

The hangar had been divided up to create living quarters and two large forms and a few dozen people were inside.

One of the large figures illuminated by the lights was a red, white, and blue mechanical dragon.

The other was a white god of war.

A girl sat at the dragon's feet, looking outside.

She looked through the half-open hangar door to watch a gray transport ship slow down.

"There are aircraft coming from Atsugi too. It looks like the ones from Europe and Continental Asia are coming in through Iruma and Yokota. How does it look to you, Alex? Even if we are being held here as a form of imprisonment."

The mechanical dragon named Alex turned his head just a bit toward the girl.

"If we swear to cooperate, they will let us out, Tatsumi. That was the condition Hajji asked for in exchange for providing them with information. If we cooperate, they will set aside everything we did."

"I wonder how Hajji feels about cooperating."

Tatsumi's monotone voice brought a short silence from Alex.

But during that silence, Tatsumi sighed.

She then bent forward between her knees, stretched her hands forward, and took a breath.

She hung her head between her arms.

"I'm really not good with this kind of emotional trouble."

"It's not my favorite thing either. But…"

"But?"

"I think Hajji is closer to Mikoku than we are right now."

Tatsumi stopped moving while still leaning forward.

“Closer to her? She wants to bring Shino back to life and now she’s trying to change the world. He may be her former comrade and might as well be family to her, but he’s trying to stop her. So how is he close to her?”

“Because he isn’t looking away from her,” answered Alex. “Tatsumi. At the very least, the two of us aren’t looking at Mikoku. We’re leaving everything up to her.”

“But nothing we could do would change anything.”

Tatsumi slowly straightened up.

She looked to the other people sitting around the hangar or leaning against the walls.

“If Noah is being used as a defensive weapon, it will use its great army. You all know what would happen if it were to attack, don’t you? Well, that hypothetical is the reality here.”

She pulled something from her straightened back.

With a troubled smile, she showed off the knife in her right hand.

“They didn’t even check us over for weapons properly. It’s like they think we’re on their side or something. But…”

She looked down at the knife and realized the blade was shaking.

The shaking was growing.

“…”

She dropped the steel blade.

A metal sound rang out as it hit the concrete.

“Tatsumi,” said Alex.

“Yes.”

She nodded and looked to her right wrist while holding it in her left hand.

Her right hand was shaking ever so slightly.

“I can’t focus properly ever since losing to Ryuuji last night. …I’m afraid to hold a blade.”

A line appeared on her right palm.

The red line slowly grew thicker and produced a few scarlet drips.

She did not even wipe away the color on her hand.

“I can’t even use the defensive techniques I was so good at.”

She clenched her right hand and the color was squeezed out.

She then slid her left hand along the floor.

“What about you, Alex?”

She grabbed something from the floor.

It was a bolt.

“Your destruction has been picking up speed since last night.”

Her eyes were turned toward the ships and aircraft invading Tokyo outside, but her heart remained inside the hangar.

“Our fight is already over, so do you really think we can go see Mikoku now?”

●

Noon that day passed by relatively quietly.

The international UCATs entered through bases and ports around Japan and gathered at the designated eight locations around Tokyo.

They created their formations inside smaller concept spaces set up near the large one surrounding the Leviathan.

One of those was located in front of Mitaka Station of western Tokyo. That reserve concept space was being used for Formation 7 to prepare.

Inside the concept space, tanks and fighters had occupied the area around the station and they were checking on the corridor connecting to the Leviathan's concept space and on the route their forces would take.

Inside Mitaka Station, eight figures were gathered at a sunny spot on the western edge of the first line's platform.

The eight boys and girls were wearing white armored uniforms.

They sat around a table, eating a late lunch.

A girl with short hair grabbed bread and vegetables to make a sandwich.

"So Heo, American UCAT had a Christmas presents raffle to help raise morale, right? What did you win?"

She was answered by Heo who was scooping gratin onto her plate from an insulated metal container.

"Well, Kazami, I got a Christmas cake."

"That's nice. It sounds like a good omen to me."

"Yes. And to make sure you don't grow faint from an empty stomach on the battlefield, it was a super fatty cake with thirty thousand Calories. And – here's the best part – I was thinking we could all eat it here. …Why are you all looking away? A-answer me, Harakawa."

"Don't drag me into this. I'm too busy ingesting rice."

"C-c'mon, can't you at least look at it?"

A tall girl looked at the large caramel-colored cylinder Heo placed on the table.

She tilted her head at the excessively-shiny chocolate display saying "Happy X'mas".

"Is this edible, Heo?"

"Y-yes! Do you want some, Mikage?"

"Wah!"

The boy next to Mikage moved to stop her by grabbing her chest from behind.

"Y-you mustn't, Mikage-san! If you eat that, you'll gain a bunch of weight and it'll be sad!"

"But Ryuuji-kun, if I don't help, Heo will have to eat it all herself."

"So you're already assuming I'm going to eat it all?"

Heo's comment led everyone to look away again.

On the west end, a black-haired girl tugged on the sleeve of a boy with a small animal on his head.

"C-c'mon, Sayama-kun. If you look them in the eye now, you'll get dragged

into it.”

“Heh heh heh. Shinjou-kun, I do not mind at all if your body gains a little more volume.”

“Eh? R-really, Sayama-kun? …You’d prefer it if my breasts and butt were a little bigger?”

“As long as you do not get careless, you will be wonderful no matter what.”

“Really? Oh, c’mon…”

A well-built boy glared and pointed at the two of them.

“Hey, Chisato. Those idiots have gotten even crazier since yesterday.”

“I-I am not crazy, Izumo-san!”

“Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, that is what all the crazy people say. Why not try following my example?”

Shinjou strangled Sayama, but no one bothered stopping it. This was par for the course. So was Sayama turning purple from cyanosis.

But Kazami glanced over at the two of them.

“Come to think of it, I found two people sleeping in the same bed when I went to check on their dorm room before noon. Now, who was that?”

“Eh? Um, w-well…”

“Oh? Have you forgotten, Shinjou-kun? As if to say this could be our last chance, we stayed up all night checking on each other’s bodies, Setsu-kun’s included.”

“Waaaahhh!!”

While everyone’s focus was on those two, Heo stealthily cut the cake into eight equal portions.

…*We can share the damage. We can all share it together!*

“Yes, that’s what teammates are for!”

“Heo, why are you emitting a sinister aura as you cut that cake?”

“Eh!? H-how did you notice!?”

When she turned around, the cream on the knife fell to the table.

The instant it landed on the white tablecloth, a change came over it.

“W-wah! What’s with this fat!? It’s spreading out like something from a horror movie!!”

They all gave a shout and moved their chairs precisely thirty centimeters back from the table.

Confused, Heo grabbed the manufacturer’s comment card from the box.

“ ‘This super fatty cake is an shout of protest against the pathetic modern health foods! If you can survive eating this, then you truly are healthy! –John A. Fettmann’ ”

For some reason, the others all hung their heads and Harakawa turned his back.

“That’s a German name, isn’t it? Give it your best shot, Heo.”

“G-give what my best shot!?”

She grabbed and pulled on his armored uniform’s collar.

“I-it’s a perfectly fine cake. It’s just a little fatty is all. Look.”

She used a spoon to fling some of the cream on the knife toward the pigeons in the station.

The pigeons quickly surrounded and pecked at the brown cream on the concrete floor.

Heo looked back at the others.

“S-see? Wild animals aren’t worried about it for no reason, so you can eat it too! It’s a perfectly fine cake. Wild savages like you should be able to handle it just fine!”

“Heo-kun, it is only appropriate to compare human beings to wild animals when you are talking about the old man or Hiba-sensei. And if possible, could you look behind you again?”

“Eh?”

She turned around and saw all of the pigeons were resting their bellies on the floor and hanging their heads.

“Wh-what’s wrong, you guys!? C-c’mon, fly! Fly like the wind!”

The pigeons all turned their backs on her and collapsed.

Heo heard the others whispering behind her.

“Oh, poor Heo. Once she eats that whole thing, she’ll be an expert in obesity.”

“Her body will be stuffed with foie gras like those pigeons.”

“Hey, Chisato. If you eat that, how much would you have to exercise? All the way around the earth?”

“C’mon, Kaku. Don’t ask the impossible. And besides, we’re talking about Heo here.”

…Th-they’re all keeping their distance from me!

She slowly looked back just in time to see them all resume eating their lunches with a smile.

But…

“Wh-who moved the cake in front of my seat!?”

They all maintained their smiles.

“Oh, Sayama-kun, this marmalade is delicious. It’s so marvelous they should call it marvelade.”

“Ha ha ha. How wonderful, Shinjou-kun.”

…They’re doing everything they can not to address it!

Heo made up her mind.

Her shoulders drooped as she sat in her seat and placed the box over the cake.

“You’re putting it away?” asked Izumo.

“Yes. It can wait until…I see an opening.”

When she erased her smile and glared at them, their smiles froze over.

“H-Heo?” asked Kazami while sipping at her oolong tea. “It takes courage to throw out even the bad memories. You could burn it like a candle.”

“You might wake up one morning to find it stuffed in your mouth.”

Heo's plain threat brought a cold sweat to the others, but they did their best to keep their smiles.

"For future reference, let's see what's inside it, shall we? Also, try not to open your mouth on a dark road late at night."

"I-I don't like the sound of that…" said Shinjou.

Heo slowly lowered her shoulders and sorrowfully brought her hands to the corners of her eyes.

"I…I didn't ask for this horrible fate…"

"You were pretty excited when you heard you'd won the cake."

"Th-that was…u-um!"

"Yeah… you're pretty hopeless."

"N-no, that was before I'd checked what kind of cake it was!"

"In other words, you had failed to gather all of the facts."

"But… Wh-why are you all such bullies? And Harakawa, please look this way."

"This always happens. Bear with it, Heo Thunderson."

She could only sigh and lower her shoulders.

This always happened. It really did. But…

…This might be the last time.

●

Heo understood that this could be the last time.

No one said it, but they had gathered here because they all understood that.

By dinnertime, they would all have left for their respective locations.

This could very well be the final time they could all be together.

In that way, the trouble they were giving her was actually incredibly important and valuable.

"Wait. I was just about to accept this, but those are two different issues."

"Why are you talking to yourself? Are you okay? No, I suppose not. Then there's nothing we can do. Understood."

"H-Harakawa, you settle everything for yourself too quickly these days!"

At that point, the large clock in front of Mitaka Station reached three o'clock.

They heard an electronic tone from their wristwatches and Izumo looked up into the sky.

"Six more hours, hm?"

"I wonder what the world will be like this time tomorrow," replied Sayama.

"What do you think it will be like, Sayama-kun?"

"Well," he answered. "I expect I will have made the world eroundic using your concept of eroundism."

Shinjou smiled as she slammed a boiled egg into his forehead. And starting from the top of the egg.

The egg loudly cracked open and Sayama fell from his chair.

"Oh, sorry," said Shinjou. "I didn't have anything to crack it on. Thanks, Sayama-kun."

…That was an incredible retort.

The Japanese really know how to do it, thought Heo, while also deciding to ask something.

“But will you all be okay? I think this will be an intense battle.”

She took a breath and gathered her courage to ask.

“Will the Concept Core weapons really work?”

“That’s a good question.” Kazami exchanged a glance with Izumo. “Well, we should manage if the Leviathan spits out some small fries. And even if not…”

Kazami looked back toward Heo with a smile and a serious look in her eyes.

She looked at both her and Hiba.

“I heard from American UCAT that you have some kind of plan.”

“You do too, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah. …After all, our attacks weren’t enough for the Leviathan.”

Kazami straightened her back and looked at all of the others.

“You have to have given it some thought too. Isn’t that right, Sayama?”

She addressed the boy who had recovered and returned to his chair.

He brushed off his armored uniform while wearing Georgius.

However, Heo knew Georgius had not been able to fully destroy Mikoku’s regeneration concept despite breaking the philosopher’s stone.

As if to check on that, Shinjou asked him a question.

“Will Georgius actually work, Sayama-kun?”

“It will.” Sayama nodded and lightly clenched both Georgiuses to show them off. “After all, I now know the true way to use it.”

“Eh?”

Everyone else’s confused voices joined Shinjou’s.

What does that mean? wondered Heo as she saw Sayama smile.

“You taught me how in your novel, Shinjou-kun.”

“My novel? D-did I really write anything that could teach you something?”

“Yes. For example, that you can’t help but cry out if I grab your butt hard enough for my fingers to dig into it, that your navel is a weak point, and that the line above and below your navel also sends a tingling down your spine.”

“Waaaah!!”

Shinjou grew beet red and tried to stop Sayama, but everyone jumped at her to hold her back.

“C’mon, Sayama, tell us! What did Shinjou teach you!? Tell it loud and don’t omit any details!!”

“Wow, I’d love to hear about that too.”

“Waaah! Y-you’re not asking about Georgius at all, are you!?”

Heo shrugged and urged Sayama on while holding Shinjou’s arm.

“Heh heh. …Of course we are. Now, Sayama, tell us how babies are made!”

“Waaaah!!” shouted Shinjou. “L-let go! Let go! You have to let go! I need to stop him right now! He’s far too obscene!”

“That last part was a haiku, Shinjou-kun. But do not worry. Either way, the

world will not be destroyed.”

“R-really?”

“Really.” Sayama nodded. “After all, I have yet to get an indirect kiss from you via a drink.”

He suddenly looked to the table and saw a paper cup Shinjou had drunk from.

“Oh, speak of the devil.”

With a shout, the others grabbed it and held it out to Shinjou who was still being restrained.

“Shinjou! Shinjou! Hurry up and drink the rest! If Sayama drinks it, he might lose his attachment to this world!”

There’s something wrong with this world if this is how we have to protect it, thought Heo.

At any rate, Shinjou protested as the drink vanished down her throat.

Once she finished it off, she took a breath.

“Ah. Th-there! Sayama-kun! What’s this about a true way to use Georgius?”

“Well.” He nodded. “I would like something to replace that drink.”

Hearing that desire, the others exchanged smiling looks with Shinjou in the center.

“Eh? No, w-wait ,everyone! Wah! This is a trap! This is Sayama-kun’s trap!”

Heo thought to herself while restraining Shinjou.

…This really is the same as always.

I’m not sure if it’s a good thing to think of it as “comfortable cruelty”, she began in her heart. *But I hope we can keep doing this forever.*

Shinjou’s cries of protest (but not too much protest) rose into the winter sky.

●

Mikoku slept in the evening sky.

She slept on top of the Leviathan’s forehead.

The night before, she had slept in a room of the residential area near the head, but it had been hard to sleep with the place so deserted.

That may have been why she had been overwhelmed by weariness after eating the meal Noah had synthesized and climbing up here.

“You slept well. Over.”

She had been fast enough sleep for Noah to comment on it.

She sat up and folded up the blanket Noah had placed over her.

She then lightly rolled her shoulders.

“With the atmospheric protection and the sun, this place is like a greenhouse.”

“Is it comfortable? Over.”

“Yes.” She looked to Noah and tapped lightly on the Leviathan’s forehead. “You really are a machine made for people.”

“Currently, I am only for you. Over.”

“That’s true,” she replied before immediately correcting herself. “No.”

She looked inside the glass at the center of the Leviathan’s forehead.

She stared at the girl there.

“All we have is Shino. And only for self-satisfaction on a frightening scale.”

“Testament.”

Noah nodded, but then…

“Those trying to stop us have arrived. Over.”

“So they’re here.”

“Testament,” replied Noah.

Looking down, white forms were visible directly below and around the Leviathan.

They were winged automatons, gods of war blocking the roads, and mechanical dragons flying around the sky.

Their appearances had changed since they were inside the Leviathan.

“You used the concepts being created to modify them for combat, didn’t you?”

“It was necessary for victory. Over,” said Noah. “And to ring the bell. Over.”

“Yes.”

Mikoku stood up and looked across the evening world stretching in every direction from Shinjuku.

“Come listen to Noah’s bell ring. Today is the day of the holy one’s birth. It is a day of festivities. It truly is the best day for the ringing of a bell.”

She saw the sun sinking below the mountains in the west.

The setting sunbeams vanished before she had a chance to take another breath.

“The night has arrived. The night of the final battle.”

With those words, the sunlight completely vanished and only the scarlet vestiges remained.

The sky grew colder and darker.

The world was approaching night.

●

At 8:40 PM of December 25, eight different movements began at a radius of fifteen kilometers from Tokyo’s Shinjuku Station.

This was the beginning.

Aircraft and tanks were forming ranks on the streets inside the concept spaces and mechanical dragons were trembling in large parking lots or on elevated highways.

The battlefield covered eight regions.

The weapons containing the eight world dragons had gathered around Shinjuku.

The Concept Core weapons had all been given bearers.

Region 1: North. Kita. Leader is Hiba. The dragon-gouging weapon is Keravnos.

Region 2: Northeast. Arakawa. Leader is Kashima. The dragon-slicing weapon is Totsuka.

Region 3: East. Sumida. Leader is Heo. The dragon-blasting weapon is the Vesper Cannon.

Region 4: Southeast. Koutou. Leader is Sayama. The dragon-striking weapon is the Four Dragon Balls.

Region 5: South. Meguro. Leader is Kazami. The dragon-piercing weapon is G-Sp2.

Region 6: Southwest. Setagaya. Leader is Brunhild. The dragon-severing weapon is Gram.

Region 7: West. Suginami. Leader is Izumo. The dragon-cutting weapon is V-Sw.

Region 8: Northwest. Nerima. Leader is Abram. The dragon-slaying weapon is B-Sp.

The seals for the heavens and the earth would be handled by Shinjou and

Sayama who had Wanambi and Mukiti in Region 4.

Wanambi would be the heavens and Mukiti the earth.

The seal to become the declarations of heaven and earth had to be activated on top of the Leviathan above Shinjuku station.

If they created a sealing wall at an equal distance between the heavens and the earth and caught the Leviathan in the center, they predicted they could keep the strength of the seal constant in each direction and therefore contain the Leviathan.

To do that, Sayama and Shinjou would approach the Leviathan along with the other representatives. Their plan was to arrive on top of the Leviathan using the mechanical dragons or something else.

They could guess Mikoku and Noah would be there.

If UCAT could withstand the Leviathan's attacks and complete the ten-direction seal and declarations by 10:30, they would win.

If Mikoku and Noah could hold off the seal and declarations until the negative concepts fully activated at 10:30, they would win.

The main problem would be the seals of heaven and earth.

They had to be activated on top of the Leviathan, so Sayama and Shinjou would have to fight Mikoku and Noah.

Effectively, victory would come down to whether they could defeat those two and establish the seals.

And for backup, they had the international UCATs and the Gears.

UCAT had formed a reserve army for themselves and the students and others had been added in to create a multi-national and multi-occupational army.

If the members of the other Gears were counted, it was even a multi-species army.

Some of them would have normally worn a suit to work, some would have maintained vehicles in work uniforms, others would have worked a register in a store uniform, and yet others would have worked agricultural, janitorial, or security jobs.

Normally, they all should have returned home for Christmas at this time.

Nevertheless, they all stood here equipped with their personal weapons and armored uniforms.

●

At 8:41, Sayama's voice arrived over a communicator as everyone had finished their preparations.

They breathed silent white breaths below the darkness and light as they heard a dignified voice.

"Good morning, everyone. It is time for the world to wake."

They all listened.

"Your mission today is to beat down the idiot who has no idea what to do with herself because she has no one to spend this wonderful night with. You are to

insist she lets this night continue. But remember one thing."

Sayama continued.

"She is another version of ourselves."

They all gasped at that.

Their white breaths vanished and they focused only on Sayama's voice.

"Feelings of anger when something is lost and the memories and pain that continue for years afterwards are something we all have and something we all wish would stop. …In other words, she is simply trying to do for us what we cannot. Therefore, I think there is one promise we must keep no matter what."

Namely…

●

At 8:42 PM, Sayama held his cellphone to his ear at the lead of the army in Ariake.

"Once we win this battle, we will not accuse Toda Mikoku of any crime."

●

At the same time, Shinjou's eyes opened wide as she listened to Sayama from his side.

"You mean…"

She looked up at him and he spoke quietly without looking her way.

"Listen. She is trying to reject this world. I will neither allow nor condemn that action. I will leave her out in the cold by saying rejecting the world is no big deal."

So…

"If you think being killed by her would be a wasted death, then leave. If you wish to punish her or kill her, then do so only after punishing and killing yourself. After all – let me say it again – she is another version of ourselves. It seems she has no one to spend this night with, but that is only because we are the ones that will spend the night with her. So…"

She heard him speak.

"Do not let this partner kill you during the dance. She is as desperate as the loyal retainer who cannot allow himself to approach the princess."

●

At 8:43, no one moved in response to Sayama's announcement.

No one moved back and no one ran away.

For that reason, Sayama's voice continued from the various communicators.

"All of you have odd tastes."

And…

"I too have odd tastes."

●

At 8:44, Heo was preparing to board Thunder Fellow.

Behind the specially equipped blue mechanical dragon, she tried to get Harakawa to kiss her.

He refused.

But after climbing into the cockpit, he did so without speaking a word.

●

At 8:45, Hiba had finished checking on Susamikado's secondary weaponry.

Sibyl asked him about Mikage's evolution. She asked if he knew what new evolution she had wanted to show him just before Tatsumi had destroyed her evolution philosopher's stone.

Hiba gave the following answer:

"You can have children now, can't you?"

Mikage only blushed, smiled, and gave an "nn" of confirmation.

●

At 8:46, Kazami held G-Sp2 and took a slender metal cylinder from the development department.

She nodded when she was told it was "just in case". She then sighed and made a call on her cellphone.

"Kaku?"

She took a breath.

"Hey? How does it feel to be standing in front of the world?"

●

At 8:47, Izumo rested V-Sw on his shoulder and held his cellphone between his head and other shoulder with a metal cylinder from the development department hanging from his waist.

"How are you feeling? The festival's about to start, isn't it?"

●

At 8:48, Mikoku crossed her arms atop the Leviathan's forehead with Noah behind her.

She checked a transparent 3D map of Tokyo with white lights indicating her army.

"Now, it's time to decide what kind of world this will be."

●

At 8:49, Noah nodded at Mikoku's words and calculated the estimated time of the positive concepts' creation.

The answer came out to 10:30:18 that night.

"Please let me ring the bell. Over."

As the Leviathan, she gave her commands to the army.

They were to work together and use their autonomous decisions to exterminate the enemy army.

●

At 8:50, the operators of the control devices creating the vast concept space containing the Leviathan detected movement in the philosopher's stone readings within the concept space.

They raised the output to strengthen the walls of the concept space and reported to the eight armies that the Leviathan's army had begun to move.

The angels, gods of war, and mechanical dragons had spread their wings.

●

At 8:51, lights illuminated an outdoor stage and people were gathering on the road in the real version of Shinjuku outside the concept space.

When they heard the backing band tuning their instruments, the crowd cheered to bear with the cold.

Those voices could be seen as the prelude before the festival began.

●

At 8:52, Ryouko watched live footage from Shinjuku inside the Tamiya house in Akigawa of western Tokyo.

She asked for some tea.

"Koujiiiii, it's about to start, so could you bring in some tea and snacks?"

"You mean you're not calling me in to watch it!?"

Kouji sighed in the kitchen, opened a window for ventilation, and looked into the sky.

He looked up into the moonless, cloudy sky.

●

At 8:53, Kashima's wife, Natsu, closed the shutters at their house in Tanashi of northern Tokyo.

The sound would have drawn the baby's interest and woken her, so she kept the shutters partly open.

She held the baby to comfort her and looked to the front door.

A large paper package wrapped in red ribbon sat there.

"It's far too soon for a tricycle."

She gave a trouble smile as she checked on the package with her child in her arms.

It had been sent by her own parents.

●

At 8:54, the three types of winged automatons, the three types of gods of war, and the three types of mechanical dragons began to move out using their

respective abilities.
The names of what they were modeled after were written on their surface.
Those names came from the hierarchy of angels.
They all opened their mouths, shut their eyes, and produced words.
“Will this be a holy night?”
Their voices and tones belonged to Mikoku.
These were the voices of the temporary personality Noah had given them.
The personality left by Top-Gear set those nine angel types in motion.
They cut through the wind on the way to the border of the battlefield.
They were to hunt down the wills that opposed heaven’s intentions.

●

At 8:55, Sayama raised his right hand.
Surprised, everyone silently focused on him.
“Heh heh heh. You fell for my feint, everyone. The real command is coming from over here.”
He lightly raised his left hand and received a roundhouse kick from Shinjou.

●

At 8:56, Sayama got back up and raised his left hand again.
At the same time, the Leviathan’s concept space was linked to the eight concept spaces surrounding it.

●

At 8:57, the wind blew.
That wind was proof that they had connected to a vast space.
The blowing wind signaled the linking of the battlefield.
And that wind brought enemies with it.

●

At 8:58, Sayama saw a swarm of angels down the road they stood on.
They were approximately one hundred twenty meters away.
The angel automaton at the lead carried itself in a way Sayama recognized.
“Is that you, Toda Mikoku? Is that entire army you?”
The angel did not reply, but Sayama’s left hand was still raised.
“Everyone, prepare your weapons!!”

●

At 8:59, they all replied.
“Testament!”
After a slow pause, Sayama’s voice gave them another push forward.
He swung down his left hand and spoke to the enemy that prepared their weapons and moved just like his other self.

“Everyone.”

●

At precisely 9:00…
“Let the battle begin!”
Sayama gave a roar.
“Go ahead!!”

Chapter 21

“Heavenly Banquet”

Droplets glow in the world’s eyes
Which of the two dancers
Can speak like you?

●

The battle began with a clash on the front lines.

The pure-white two-winged Level 9 Angelus automatons used swords and cannon-equipped Cowling Swords to attack their enemy from the sky and ground like a great wave.

Their downpour of cannon fire and horizontal blasts crushed the miscellaneous approaching soldiers and they would use their swords to cut down the survivors.

UCAT did not have many who could fly. All three hundred thousand of the enemy automatons could do so, but UCAT only had at most a thousand per army and those thousand were too important to be worn down on the front lines.

This meant the clash between armies resulted in the pure-white army pushing back the miscellaneous army with an overwhelming wave.

“…!”

The angels could be heard firing and return fire flew from the surface.

But the UCAT forces could not hold their position as the phalanx of angels pushed forward.

The UCAT scout units sent forward to secure the front lines were all pushed back behind buildings or below elevated roadways.

The pure-white angels moved in to crush the enemy scouts who would send intelligence back to the rest of the enemy.

They had the upper hand in numbers. They also had the upper hand in mobility and combat ability.

But they knew not to underestimate this enemy. The word “caution” was carved deeply in their base memories.

“Yes.”

The angels opened their mouths as if to sing.

They opened their mouths as they filled the cloudy sky, fired, and crushed the enemies who had failed to escape the front line in time.

They sang in a tone above the audible range as they flew through the sky and placed their feet on the backs of high-rise buildings.

“We were made to serve mankind.”

Some expanded their Cowling Swords to reveal the blade.

“But only one of them remains to be our master.”

Some closed the blades and opened the cannon.

“We desire mankind.”

They created a great wave of cannon fire and sword strikes.

“Oh, will you become human? Will you become human? As this inhuman world is made human, listen to the song that summons humanity.”

The angels formed a great ring in the sky and their wings glowed as they protected the Leviathan.

Even on the ground, the wings reacted to the song by filling with light and

glowing brightly.

“————!”

After confirming the position of the enemy’s front line, they charged in their phalanx formation.

In an instant, their acceleration produced an explosion of water vapor behind their charging ranks.

This supersonic tsunami produced cannon fire and sword strikes as it approached.

Armored uniforms could not defend against it, tanks were too slow to avoid it, and their numbers were too small to weather it.

The road was torn apart and the windows of the buildings shattered.

The white wave of thousands approached UCAT’s front line faster than sound.

“…!?”

They all prepared their defenses.

“Have you ever heard of brute force?”

But then some people stepped in front of each army to face the white tsunami.

They wore blue armored uniforms. Their entire bodies were covered in metal armor, their arms held giant shields, and their feet…

“Let’s see how you like my stylish skates!”

They held their shields forward with both hands.

Those defenders stood on the front line of all eight armies and gave a unified shout.

“We are the armored soldiers of American UCAT! We’ll pave the way, so follow us!!”

With those words, blue light burst from the accelerators on their backs.

A moment later, their heavily-armored bodies shot forward.

The blue armor used sharp acceleration and a sharp trajectory to slam into the white wave.

The speed displayed inside their helmets instantly reached two hundred mph.

Their commander gave a shout toward the approaching white wave.

“Brace for impact!!”

They crouched low and held their shields as if to shovel into the ground.

“!!”

They collided.

The enemy’s speed was greater, but they had the greater armor and mass.

A deafening sound filled the air.

It sounded like colliding rocks and it was accompanied by a flash of light.

The wind burst and cutting blades of shockwaves raced every which way.

Most of those on both sides were blown away, but the enemy had the overwhelming advantage in numbers.

Their wave was thick and very nearly swallowed up the blue collision.

“Bear with it!!”

One of them gave a yell as one of his shields was blown away and he thrust

the other one in front of him.

“Stay low and push through!!”

The angels were flying while they were racing along the ground, so by angling their shields, they could deflect the enemy behind them.

“Blow them away!!”

Behind them, the people making up the front line fired on the white wave knocked upwards by the armored soldiers.

The shock of the upwards impact left the angels defenseless, so the counter punch of the bullets was enough to break them.

But the armored soldiers continued forward without worrying about that result.

A second and third wave was waiting in reserve, so they charged forward to fill the holes broken by the others.

They endured, punched, and tore through the white wave, but they were also knocked away and crushed. Nevertheless, not one of them allowed themselves to be pushed back.

“Ahead! Go ahead! After all…we don’t have a single reason to fall back!!”

Up in the sky, they could see pure-white reinforcements flying to each region.

But before those reinforcements could arrive…

“————!!”

They all accelerated.

They aimed for the gap between the enemy and the ground.

Their arms were simply thrust forward without doing anything fancy.

They kept their center of gravity low and desired only to move forward.

One collision led to another and they heard gunfire behind them.

It sounded like applause.

So they continued forward. They moved quickly and sent pieces of asphalt spraying backwards.

They used their weight to send doll pieces scattering.

“Let out a roar, men!”

They saw the end of the angel tsunami. Beyond that was the enemy’s true front line.

An overhead formation positioned like a great wave and a gunner formation straight ahead were both visible beyond the charging tsunami.

But as long as they could break through the tsunami, they could face the angels’ front line.

“So let’s go! This is the last big wave of the year!!”

With those words, the men rushed forward.

A few of them were lost to the flying white sound wave, but…

“!”

A single signal gun rang out and they blasted the stormy winter wave into the sky.

Like a wave hitting a breakwater, their armor, speed, and conviction smashed

the wave to pieces.

They had lost most of their armor, but…

“Ohhh!!”

They made it through.

They swung their bodies forward to become a blue wave of their own and they flung themselves toward the enemy.

The angels’ cannon fire poured down like rain and flew in from straight ahead, but the strikes and impacts were no longer enough to stop their momentum.

“————!!”

But a moment later, the accelerating blue wave was crushed from above.

●

“!?”

It was an invisible power.

By the time they realized it was gravity, it was already too late.

They had been hit by a massive surface.

They had been knocked down.

The soldiers in blue armored uniforms were knocked and crushed to the ground, their own weight and speed sent them rolling along the ground, and their entire bodies were destroyed.

It only took an instant.

All that remained were a cloud of dust and the shimmering heat of the sputtering accelerators.

All that could be heard were the sounds of falling equipment and groans of pain.

All, that is, except for the sounds of wings in the sky.

Soon, everyone saw countless angels descending from the heavens.

The first to descend wore white armored uniforms, had the words “Level 8 – Arch” engraved on their arms, and had twelve wings. Their hands were empty, but the air was bending around them. They were controlling powerful gravity.

And these newcomers were not the only enemy reinforcements.

Some new forms were visible behind the Angelus automatons forming a wall up ahead. These automatons had larger wings than the Angelus ones and were armed with gun-spears and shields.

Their armored uniforms resembled suits of armor and were engraved with the words “Level 7 – Prince”.

A great sound came from behind even them.

It was a tremor of the earth.

Giant forms suddenly appeared from between the buildings lining the road.

These giants were over ten meters tall.

The four-winged gods of war carried swords and shields and had the words “Level 6 – Powers” carved into their shoulders.

A look into the sky showed white wings both large and small flying in circles

through the heavens.

That ring of angels was slowly descending.

The people meant to fight back could only gasp as they prepared their guns and swords.

That ring of angels descending in waves from the Leviathan was on its way to the eight attacking formations of people.

“Old mankind,” announced the angels. “If you do not wish for a new world, then be washed clean by this deluge of power. Over.”

After that nearly singing voice, the flapping and tremor of the angels signaled the beginning of their true attack.

●

Atop the Leviathan, Mikoku watched the angels attack.

The distortions of space appearing here and there looked like giant spheres of shimmering heat.

Those told her the Arch automatons were fighting.

Just like the 3rd-Gear automatons, the Arch and Prince types could use gravity for offense and defense, so they could stop bullets and bend optical weapons. If the Angelus types fired and cut through afterwards, they could break through the enemy formation evenly instead of in isolated locations.

The transparent glowing map of Tokyo surrounding Mikoku made the advance of the white army clear.

Not even one third of their forces had been deployed, but they had already pushed back the front of the enemy army quite a bit.

“Is there nothing they can do?”

As she asked her weak question, the wind rose from below.

The battle created that wind.

As her hair fluttered in that wind of battle, Mikoku frowned and looked at the battlefield map.

The black lines of the enemy were still falling back.

She held a hand toward one line in particular and an image appeared over it.

It used the visual information taken from the automatons.

The three-dimensional image showed people in blue and white armored uniforms being knocked into the air or to the ground and sometimes even collapsing after having their bodies crushed.

Mikoku frowned and closed her eyes as she watched it.

“——————”

She breathed in and listened to the one-sided din coming from below.

All of the sounds were being directed outward from within.

She immersed herself in that intense noise and asked something of the automaton behind her.

“Noah, what am I supposed to do?”

“Smile. The victor should enjoy herself. Thus…”

Noah spoke calmly and seemed to be chastising her.

“If it would make you sad, you should not create it. The new world, that is. Over.”

“I see.”

Mikoku nodded. She kept her eyes closed and ended her nod partway through to hang her head.

“…That’s right.”

She looked up with her frowning eyebrows raised.

Several images from the automatons were displayed before her eyes.

They were all images of many people being defeated or slain.

The automatons were doing their job well, so Mikoku inhaled.

She reached a hand toward the fallen people and clenched her fist through the transparent image.

“Is this all!?”

She gave a shout, breathed in, and let her body tremble once to erase her hesitation.

“Is this really all it took to defeat us back then, old world!?”

●

The angels spoke.

They spoke as they crushed their opponents as if devouring them, faced the individuals sent flying like ocean spray, let their maid uniforms sway, and walked silently.

“Is this all? Over.”

They advanced without end.

They continued firing and the number of reinforcements grew until the surface tension seemed to break and they spilled from the streets.

“Don’t you have anything more? Over.”

The angels moved forward as they spoke.

Their glowing wings shook the air and their cannon fire tore into the walls and earth, creating great pits.

The sounds were metallic. Bullets flew across the battlefield with a sound like the plucking of strings.

“It rings out.”

The angels spoke.

They sang.

“Yes.”

They seemed to desire something.

“The infinite begins. The finite ends.”

They advanced through the sky.

“Life shall be without end. Death shall be but a short comfort.”

They advanced along the earth.

“Flesh shall be born. Bone shall not be buried.”

They advanced through the air.
“Everything shall be accepted. All shall be rejected.”
They advanced between the buildings.
“Will we be brought there by the ring of the heavenly bell?”
They advanced along the asphalt.
“Will we be brought there by the desires of the world of man?”
The heavenly army of three hundred thousand and of nine types sang as they advanced.
“I no longer want to lose anything.”
They were as calm as can be.
“I will no longer try to gain anything.”
Their weapons targeted the human ranks.
“Because everything is there.”
They squeezed their triggers and sent their words toward the people who were too frightened to move.
“Over.”
But just before the final rumble of cannon fire sounded, something shot out toward them.
It was a voice.
“Are you stupid!?”
The speaker used light itself for wings.
“What are you so satisfied with!? What do you mean you won’t try to gain anything!?”
The attack came from the heavens above.
“What’s that, some new kind of diet!?”
Like a comet, light fell from the sky and collided with the angels’ front line.

●

The evacuated people watched as the angels’ front line was torn into by a power descending from a spot that seemed higher than heaven itself.
A crater with a radius of over one hundred meters was torn into the earth.
The surrounding buildings were knocked over along with the enemy and a girl with wings of light stood in the center.
Yes, that power was sure to arrive.
That power would always appear before those who fought.
She would not listen to voices asking for help.
She would arrive seeking the battlefield as her home.
The weapon she wielded was a white Cowling Spear.
Someone muttered its name.
“Gungnir…”
Someone else forced a laugh in response.
“You’re late, valkyrie.”
The winged girl did not turn back toward them.

But the glimpse of her face visible from the side contained a slight smile.

Then she began to move.

No words were needed.

No introductions were needed.

She charged toward the enemy formation.

She threw in all of her speed from the very beginning.

She did not even need to dodge the cannon fire hurriedly fired back at her.

“————!!”

She destroyed them.

It only took an instant for several dozen automatons to be thrown high into the sky. And…

“G-Sp2! Second form!!”

She pulled back the spear tip and spun around.

She aimed the spear upwards and it had become a cannon by the time she finished her spin.

She fired.

The blast tore into a four-winged Powers god of war. The light entered through the ten meter giant’s right side.

“G-Sp2! Keep at it!!”

She swung the weapon around and the extended blast transformed into a giant saber.

It cut through the god of war and sliced apart the automatons who had been blasted into the air.

They were all destroyed.

The people were initially confused.

“H-hey.”

They called out to each other.

“Ohhh!!”

Then, they advanced.

They stepped forward and the fearful ones synchronized their steps with the others to move forward.

They sped up and their pace grew to a run.

“…!!”

They all followed the winged girl who had chosen to move ahead into the fray and mow down the enemy.

She must have known what they were doing because she waited for them inside the enemy formation.

“Now.”

She stopped.

She could hear the people rushing in behind her. She could hear their solemn yet powerful footsteps.

With her comrades’ audible presence behind her, she spoke.

“I am Kazami Chisato, member of Japanese UCAT’s Team Leviathan and

caretaker of 10th-Gear's Concept Core weapon."

She prepared her weapon and gave the charging angels a beckoning wave.

"Bullets and blades aren't enough to catch up to my wings."

●

A moment later, Kazami entered a horizontal flight.

The wind exploded and she circled behind a few of the charging Angelus automatons.

"——————!?"

They frantically turned back toward her, but she ignored them.

After all, her comrades were approaching from behind. She could hear their overlapping footsteps, voices, and spirits.

"Ohhhh!!"

Finally, she heard them collide with the angels she had passed.

The collision sounded wonderful. It was the sound of their various powers colliding.

The battlefront had been opened. They were making progress.

…Now they can fight.

So she moved on. Her target was the twelve-winged angel doll standing on the road directly ahead.

It was not Noah, but she recognized this mass-produced model.

Noah had avoided her attack in the underground meeting room, so…

"Help me let off some steam!!"

She fired her cannon while charging in.

The light flew ahead of her, but the Arch automaton raised her right hand.

She used powerful gravitational control.

"——————"

G-Sp2's light was bent only fifteen centimeters in front of the hand.

It flew into the sky, but…

"I knew that would happen!"

Kazami thrust the spear tip forward.

●

Arch automaton #72 aka Arch72 received Kazami's attack.

She expanded her gravitational control to its max radius of two hundred meters around her palm.

Receiving a spear strike with her gravity and deflecting it behind her was a simple task.

She successfully received it.

Once it was stopped in her right hand and the girl was briefly stopped with it, she would throw in a zone of extra weight using her left hand.

It would be over once she crushed the girl.

But then she noticed something strange. The strike to her right hand was

light.

"…!?"

Arch72 instantly checked with her high-speed sight devices.

It was indeed the spear tip that had hit her hand, but…

…It was the lower shield portion!?

The shield was easily removed from the spear.

The spear continued forward, leaving the shield behind.

The spear's wielder, Kazami, circled to Arch72's right with the spear.

A moment later, Kazami flapped her wings.

…!

She vanished. She had circled behind Arch72.

Arch72 responded by accelerating.

She made her clockwise turn by using her gravitational control to spin herself like a top.

She was instantly able to check in all three hundred sixty degrees.

Yet Kazami was not there.

"That's some nice spinning."

The voice she heard came from behind her as she spun.

The enemy remained behind her spinning back, so Arch72 decided to swing both hands back to send a mass of gravity behind her.

She would slam that gravity into the enemy.

It only took an instant.

She heard the earth torn into for around a dozen meters behind her.

But…

"I'm over here."

For some reason, she saw wings in front of her.

The wings held a partial spear tip and gave her a sharp look.

Arch72 did not understand.

"When? How!?"

"Spinning with you would've gotten me hit, so I flipped over you with my wings. That's all."

Arch72 briefly did not understand what the girl meant. Her memories were the ones provided by Arch0 aka Noah and those memories included Kazami's combat speed.

Her calculations told her this girl could not possibly move faster than her.

"You don't get how this is possible? It's simple."

Kazami gave the answer.

"Why did I fire first to briefly stop you? Why did I make a feint with my spear instead of circling behind you from the get-go? Why did I focus on speed and stay behind you instead of attacking? Why did I fly up from the easily-predicted spot behind you?"

"Well…"

"If I have a way of using my experience and tactics to lower your speed and

raise my own so that calculating everything out with a simple speed value isn't enough, then I can still get the upper hand here."

"You're going to lose. And not to me."

Arch72 saw Kazami crouch down.

Beyond her, UCAT soldiers aimed their guns her way while taking control of the battlefield.

A moment later, a spark of gunfire pierced through her.

It passed through the very center of her chest. This was enough to tell her this entire situation was a lost cause.

And it had been done by the hands of those without any particularly great power.

●

Brunhild heard a joyous cry.

She had charged to the front line and fought using Gram, but at some point, the others had passed her by.

She had a thought as she saw them move ahead.

…Once I moved to the front line, they realized they could advance.

The reports from the other locations told similar stories.

The bearers of the Concept Core weapons were cutting a straight line into the enemy's front line.

The people were following that bearer of power.

Some had been shot, cut, or crushed, but none of them felt any more fear.

"You all sure change your tone when things start looking better."

Brunhild pulled her hat low over her eyes but still advanced with the black cat by her side.

She scattered defense charms with her left hand and lifted the holy sword in her right.

The witch raised a sharp voice.

"Go forth, mankind!!"

She spoke of the reason why she had been late to arrive.

"We will now raise our flag! We will raise the wall to hold the world in place!!"

With those words, Tokyo was enclosed in sudden walls of light.

●

The walls of bluish-white light rose from a semicircle formation at their base.

The semicircles were seals created from an emblem and they had a radius of over five kilometers. Their bottoms stabbed into the earth while internal patterns and writing rotated around the bluish-white semicircles.

These were circular seals.

The power of the Concept Cores had created a sealing field.

The reason each region's main fighter had been late stood tall in the sky.

They towered above the battlefield.

Their colors were still pale and the top of the glowing walls still seemed to fade into the sky.

Regardless, the walls in the eight directions illuminated the people from behind.

The light also illuminated what approached them from up ahead.

The people moved forward as if pushed onward by the light.

They advanced while supported by the semicircles and walls surrounding them from eight directions.

But the heavenly host did not sit idly by.

They sang.

As the prelude to the ringing of the bell, the three hundred thousand sets of wings sang as they advanced.

And as the two armies prepared to clash, two things appeared: a pure-white god of war and a pure-white mechanical dragon.

At the same time, a voice spoke from atop the Leviathan in the center of the heavenly host.

“Okay!”

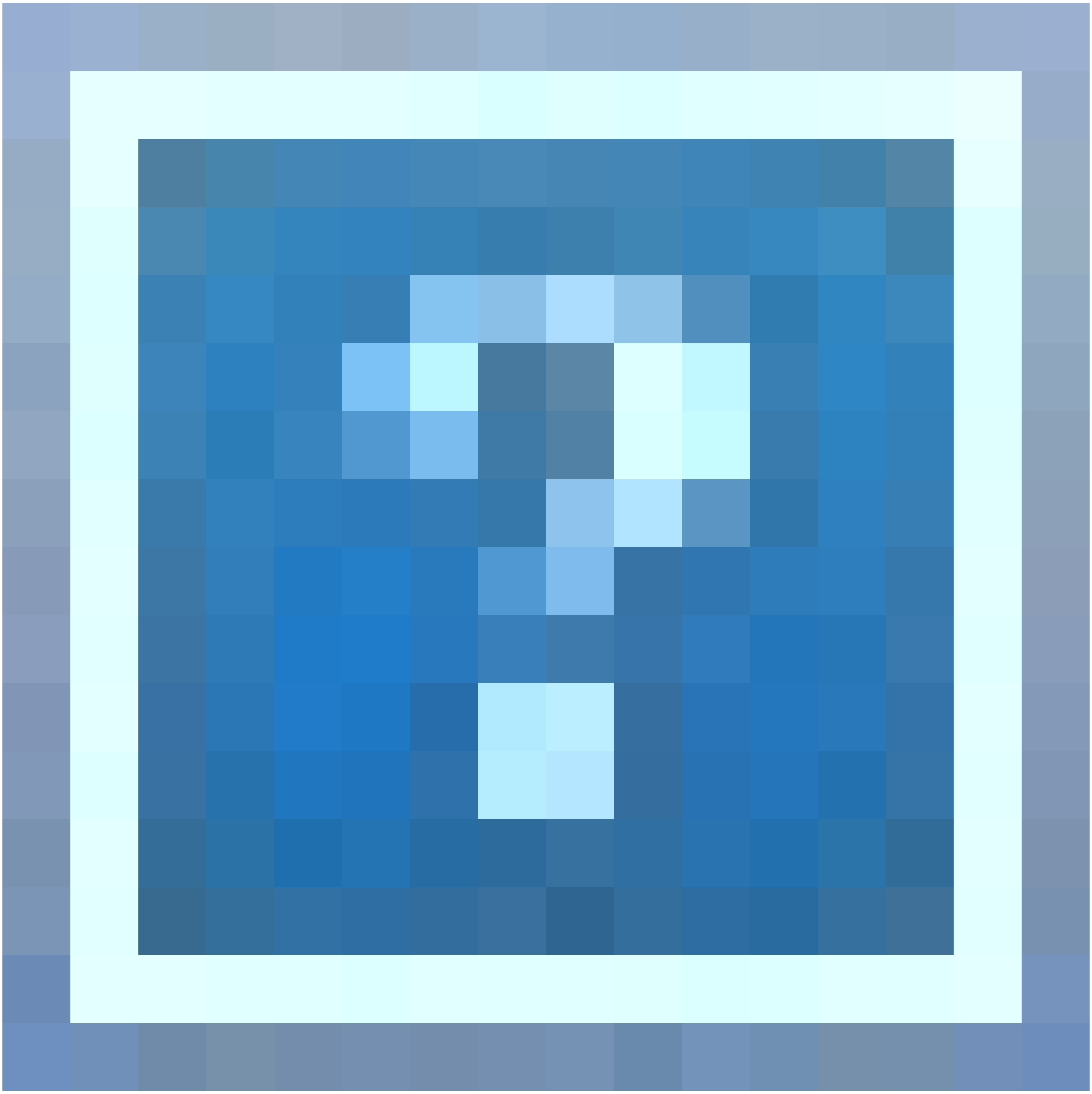
Mikoku raised her right hand with Noah by her side.

“Units 1 and 2, head out!”

With those words, Noah lightly waved her hands.

The gods of war waiting in the city and the mechanical dragons flying through the sky flew toward the eight approaching armies.

“Now!” said Mikoku. “Let all the forces of heaven attack!!”



●

Dragon cannons crushed buildings and god of war swords split the earth.

The Seraph mechanical dragons flew with their six wings and burned the city with their flame cannons.

The Cherubim mechanical dragons used their control ability to access the automatons and reorder the confused front line.

The most powerful were the Galgalim mechanical dragons. They were specialized to fight on the surface rather than in the air, so their great bodies and legs literally trampled the battlefield underfoot.

Those heavy masses of metal raced through Tokyo.

Their push managed to force back the UCAT forces who had just started to gain the upper hand.

The human front lines fell apart and the battle continued on the elevated roadways or alleyways the dragons could not enter.

But then the giants flew down.

The two-winged Lords gods of war smashed the human hiding places with high gravity defenses and flame swords.

The Virtues gods of war fired bullets of salt from the cannons on their shoulders and the four-winged Powers gods of war flew across the battlefield and worked with the Galgalim mechanical dragons to exterminate the humans.

The front lines were thrown into chaos and pushed back.

Communications were equally chaotic and no one knew where the Concept Core weapon bearers were.

Flames and destroying winds surrounded them and they saw giant forms in every direction.

Were the silhouettes moving beyond the roaring flames mechanical dragons or gods of war? To a human, it did not really matter.

A single cannon blast nearby was enough to blow them away and the heat of the dragon cannons instantly vaporized glass.

“Ahh!”

Cries of pain and anger filled the air.

They had more or less known this would happen and had prepared themselves for it, but…

“Ahhhh!!”

Raising their voices was the last form of resistance with which they could make their presence known.

The silhouettes were still moving beyond the flames. The dragons and giants were flying down from the sky or running across the earth.

A power was supposedly fighting to save them. It was supposedly protecting people and cutting open the front line somewhere.

But where?

Where was the salvation among the great powers sweeping across the

battlefield?

The people even had to ask where they themselves were.

They did not even know that as they heard cannon blasts and the footsteps of great beasts.

“Kh!”

Someone cried out.

While dragging an unmoving comrade, they looked back through the sparks rising from the gunfire.

“Dammit!”

They let out a roar.

Were their tears from the gunpowder smoke or the resistance in their heart?

On a road between buildings in the north region, the commander of a unit asked a question after confirming they were isolated on Meiji Street.

“How many are left!?”

The second-in-command answered with blood covering half his face. The man threw aside his bent rifle as he did so.

“Nine, counting you. We had the rest hide along the way.”

“Heh heh.” An elderly man spoke up with a broken sword in hand. “Marks sure did complain when I shoved him in that manhole. He said not even his house stinks that bad.”

The injured men laughed and even the captain made no attempt to hide the blood flowing onto his wrist from within his sleeve.

“I don’t know about his house, but his room sure smelled like a sewer.”

Their conversation was cut off by a tremor of the earth.

Some mechanical dragons were coming. The giant pure-white dragons approached from further down the valley of buildings.

Beyond the smoke and shimmering heat, eight of them raced along the road.

They smashed both the roadway and the buildings. On top of that, the men were all injured and they could not count on their weapons here.

The dragons were three hundred meters away, but they would fill that gap in no time.

Nevertheless, the commander spoke up.

“Hand over your ammunition and get out of the way.”

He turned his back on the rest and held a hand back for the bullets. His right hand held a light machinegun encased in a cowling.

“After all, my name can mean ‘bullet’, so I might be able to hold them off for a bit.”

The second-in-command commented after spitting some bloody saliva onto the ground.

“Hold them off?”

“Yeah. You don’t see any more of our men on this road, do you? That means we can’t let them through here. If they do get through, they’ll reach the people who must be positioned further back. I need to hold them off as much as I can so

you can warn them.”

“But.” The second-in-command’s breath sounded hollow. “These are mechanical dragons. How long do you think you can hold them off?”

“Well… About three seconds maybe?”

“Quit lying. Your right shin is broken, isn’t it?”

“Two seconds then.”

“What about your broken right collarbone?”

“Okay, one second.”

“Wasn’t your daughter stolen by some guy?”

“You’re supposed to congratulate me for that one,” replied the commander. “Well, to be honest, I think I can hold off the dragons for about 0.7 seconds.”

He held the light machinegun below his arm.

“Isn’t that badass? I can save the world for a whole 0.7 seconds.”

His body shook as he laughed.

“I’ve never done anything like that before.”

So…

“Go on and warn the others.”

As soon as he said that, more armored uniforms lined up on either side of him.

There were four on either side and they were all exhausted and injured.

The commander spoke to them as the trembling grew stronger.

“You…”

A younger man on the far end with hair dyed blond looked up into the sky and spoke.

“I’m…so tired…that I can’t move.”

The chubby middle-aged man on the other end rested his rifle on his shoulder.

“I bet I can last 0.8 seconds.”

“Yeah.” An elderly man nodded and pulled a grenade from his pocket. “Report! 0.6!”

Starting from the right, they all gave their numbers.

“0.5.”

“0.9!

“0.7!”

“0.4!”

“0.8!”

Finally, it was the second-in-command’s turn.

“I’m 0.4, so that adds up to an amazing 5.8 seconds! Talk about a generous offer!”

The second-in-command pulled a pair of broken glasses from his pocket and placed them above his nose.

“Can we save the world like this?”

“How should I know?” The commander laughed. “This is a hopeless situation, but if we can save the world for 5.8 seconds, we can’t give up just yet.”

“Very true. Without us, the world might be destroyed a whole 5.8 seconds

earlier.”

“Man, is that a lot of responsibility!!”

They all laughed at the youngest one’s comment.

But they all stopped laughing at once and faced the mechanical dragons that were now clearly in view.

“Readyyyy!!”

Just as the commander was going to say “fire”, the approaching group of pure-white dragons was blown away.

“…!?”

The first thing they saw was a building on the left bursting apart.

A black wind charged in from there and they knew its name.

“Susamikado!!”

●

It happened in an instant.

The black warrior did not hesitate to rush toward the mechanical dragons that were over four times its height.

The sword in its right hand bisected the pure-white armor and the shield in its left knocked away the giant running forms. Also…

“————!!”

A red god of war and a silver god of war rushed in after the black wind. The red one had no arms, but it swung six thick swords that floated in the air. The silver one challenged the dragons with its two swords.

Their destination had a voice.

That voice was a cheer.

A crowd entered the road. People in white or blue armored uniforms spilled onto the road like a waterfall pouring from between and above the broken buildings.

“Yes, sir! Are you okay!?”

Someone called out to the eight standing in the road. It was a maid automaton wearing glasses.

“I am Violet, a 3rd-Gear automaton. I will cover for you!! 3rd-Gear’s main force is here too, so there is nothing to worry-…”

She tripped in the middle of her sentence. Not only that, there was nothing at all to trip over.

Is she okay? wondered the commander, but she quickly hopped back to her feet.

“Um,” she began. “A-anyway, I’m fine. Thank you for risking your lives to protect this spot!”

The commander looked to the pure-white wreckage littering the road ahead.

The eight mechanical dragons were being destroyed by the black god of war and the cannons of the others who had come running in.

He then felt something poking at his side. It was the second-in-command’s

elbow.

“ ‘Thank you’? Did we do anything?”

“Shut up. Refusing to give up can be a lot of work.”

But even as he said that, the enemy was not giving up either.

Groups of white arrived from down the road and from the sky.

The mechanical dragons had their armor expanded defensively and the gods of war had their shields held out.

The commander gasped because there were far more of them than before.

“Get down!!”

Susamikado shouted with a girl’s voice.

At the same time, it put away its sword and shield.

“————!!”

When it raised an arm back and to the right, something arrived.

“Keravnos!!”

Wind blew down the road.

The concept space opening on Susamikado’s right arm sucked in the air and ejected something else.

It was the outer shell for a giant pile bunker.

But the metal object was quite different from before.

It was approximately twenty five meters long. The frame was almost three times as long as Susamikado was tall, so arms extended from it to attach to the god of war’s back and waist as well as its right arm.

The next components to be spatially ejected were an inner shell resembling a long gun barrel and shock absorbers to reduce the vibration upon firing.

After radiators, buffering bands, and power cables, a light appeared.

That light was Keravnos itself. It was 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core.

It had been split into five before, but now it was all in one piece.

It resembled a giant spear.

“This is because Mikage-san finished evolving!”

Everyone knew that Keravnos had reflected Mikage’s incomplete evolution when it had been returned during the battle near Babel.

It now revealed its final form and thousands of bolts appeared in midair to hold it together.

The final bolt rotated and plunged in to complete what looked like a giant cannon.

The vibration of its completion reverberated into the sky.

At the same time, light raced across Keravnos’s surface. The light traced across some engraved writing which said…

“In accordance to the will of the Sun King and the Moon Queen, we of 3rd-Gear swear to become a power that gathers a great many people!”

There were people here.

“So unleash your power, Keravnos!!”

With an overhand swing, Susamikado slammed the twenty five meter pile

bunker straight forward.

Keravnos's final form activated its power.

●

Light enveloped everything.

A giant bolt of lightning raced forward, covering not just the buildings lining the road but everything within a width of four hundred meters.

In legend, this was the one anti-dragon weapon the almighty god was said to have used.

Wind and a tremor accompanied the light.

"————!!"

Instead of exploding outward, it imploded.

It lasted only an instant.

For a distance of approximately 1.5 kilometers, the earth, the sky, and everything in between were annihilated.

The mechanical dragons and gods of war were no more.

The vast power produced wind and the rising heat caused the sky to flicker.

Those surrounded by flames in each battle region could see and hear it.

"…!"

Everyone running along the battlefield knew for sure that someone other than them was still fighting.

So they gave a war cry of their own.

They stood at the bottom of the flames of battle, they were surrounded by smoke, and they were stained by injuries, but they made their presence known loudly enough to drown out the movement and cannon blasts of the gods of war and mechanical dragons.

"Don't worry," someone said. "Don't worry!!"

He looked back.

There, he saw a wall of light rising into the sky and the rotating circle that protected the world below.

"As long as that's there, the world is still safe!!"

The people advanced.

"Cry out!"

They raised their voices with the words they knew someone had to be shouting even if those voices were being drowned out.

"As long as even one of us can keep moving forward, the world is still safe!!"

A voice answered them from the sky. It came from the buildings to the southwest.

A blue and white mechanical dragon was engaging several pure-white mechanical dragons in aerial combat.

"Yes!"

The blue and white dragon flipped around and fired when the enemy passed below it.

“There’s nothing to worry about! And the enemy still has a weakness!”

Thunder Fellow shot down an enemy. That enemy was a somewhat round dragon.

“These Virtues mechanical dragons relay commands for the enemy forces! So if you have anti-air weaponry, please shoot down this model of dragon! If you do, the automatons and mechanical dragons under their control will have to act independently!!”

“That’s what I like to hear!”

This new voice came from the east. The blade of light stabbing into the sky there was V-Sw.

The glowing sword was several hundred meters long, but it accurately smashed a mass of metal flying there.

The destroyed object returned to being mere minerals which turned to sand and vanished in the wind.

More sounds of destruction followed.

The front line began to move once more. It was not much yet, but it was slowly approaching the center.

Voices reverberated through the air to support that change and to let others notice it.

The southwest formation moved from Ariake to Tokyo and finally finished crossing the harbor. That was Sayama’s formation.

He advanced along a street in that major urban region and Shinjou ran by his side.

“Everyone!”

His voice rang loud.

“Do not lose! And keep moving forward!!”

But a rebuttal reached him from the sky.

Mikoku swung down an arm as she stood on the Leviathan.

“That is useless!”

●

Mikoku asked a question of her advancing enemy as she viewed them on the transparent map and through the footage from an automaton’s vision.

“Are you going stop this reformation of the world no matter what!?”

She knew the answer without being told.

Her opponent was her opposite.

She watched Sayama through an automaton’s eyes as he strengthened his forces with the power of the four balls, carried a plant creature on his back just like the others, and raced across the battlefield.

While the other groups were constructing a front line to clash with their enemy, he was focusing on mobility to break through as quickly as possible.

“Do not fall behind!”

He shouted to his comrades.

“Do not try to rush this. To us, this is walking.”

He ran and leaped.

“Do not think of this as a place of death. To us, this is a place of life.”

He built up his strength and ran to shake off the enemies approaching him.

“Do not pray to god. To us, the enemy is god!”

“Then,” said Mikoku with her eyebrows raised. “If you insist on running and arriving here, I will give you the ultimate reason to give up!”

She raised her right arm and snapped her fingers.

“I will test you, Sayama Mikoto. Let us see if you will truly never give up.”

She knew what she had to do.

“Noah! Use your excess power to rearrange the battlefield!”

“Testament.”

Noah nodded behind Mikoku.

Before that nod was even complete, a voice filled that space.

That voice filled the entire concept space.

It spoke through each of their minds.

- **—Everything leads to a single point.**

When the concept text activated, the battlefield changed.

●

As Sayama ran, he noticed two changes.

First, the angels began forming a giant circle to protect the area around the Leviathan. And second…

“Shinjou-kun!?”

Just before he heard the concept text, she had been running to his right, but now she was gone.

And she was not all that had vanished. Everything that should have been to his right was no longer there.

It almost looked like a gray mirage extending into the distance.

…What is this?

“I have only done as you wished. Since you seem to like charging forward so much, I have given you all the land you need to do so for as long as possible. Look to your left.”

After hearing Mikoku’s voice from the heavens, he looked left.

He saw a strange land there.

They had divided Tokyo up into eight regions, but for some reason, all eight were lined up in front of him.

…What is going on?

Those regions were supposed to create a circle, so he should not have been able to see them all.

Nevertheless, the land before him was connected in a straight line. And at the

very end of it all…

“Ariake and…the Leviathan in the sky above Shinjuku Station?”

Beyond the eight lined-up regions, he saw the location he had just run through and his destination.

When he saw that, he realized what this new concept meant.

Everything led to a single point.

“You mean I can only reach my destination at the center after crossing each and every region!?”

“Exactly. I even did you a favor and based it on you,” replied Mikoku. “From my ‘single point’, I can attack every single region, but you must pass through them all before reaching me at the center.”

Sayama frowned.

“Are you telling me to run through all eight regions?”

“Yes. If any single person passes through them all, the world will be reconnected and the concept will lose all meaning. And you are the one closest to the edge of the world, Sayama.”

That meant the entire battle was over if Sayama were to stop.

“I will now send my forces into all eight regions,” said Mikoku. “Your armies must survive until you have finished your run, Sayama. And listen carefully. I…”

She took a breath.

“I will not hesitate to send my army to attack Shinjou.”

“I see,” replied Sayama as he stared at the Leviathan in the distance. “That is good to hear. Now there is no need to hold back.”

He heard a sudden sound.

His cellphone was ringing in his pocket.

The people who had not been cut off from him focused on him as he pulled out the phone.

“S-Sayama-kun?”

“Yes, it is I, Shinjou-kun.”

He turned back to the flickering grayness where she should have been.

He approached the border of the flickering, reached out his hand, and could have sworn he felt something there.

“Sayama-kun.”

He heard Shinjou’s voice. She should have been right in front of him, but that precious voice was farther away than any other.

“I’m waiting for you.”

“Yes, I will be right there. I swear I will make it to you.”

He lowered his head and pressed his cheek to the flickering.

“Sayama…-kun?”

Her questioning voice felt so very close.

“Nn…”

They could not see each other, but they still kissed.

After a few seconds, he slowly pulled away.

“————————”

He turned his back on the flickering border and spoke.

“I will be right there, Shinjou-kun. No matter where you are…”

He took a breath.

“I will be there to take your hand, Shinjou-kun.”

“Yes!”

Others nodded in response too.

The comrades around him were a mixture of the special division and the standard division.

As he put his phone away, they gave him informal salutes.

“We’ll cover for you. For as long as we can keep up anyway.”

They stood on the road with their weapons at the ready. They were all filthy and not one of them was uninjured.

But Sayama nodded back while ignoring their exhaustion and injuries.

He left the four floating balls with a nearby commander and ordered the man hold the area. He told him to fall back to and protect the circle behind them.

He then pulled something else from his pocket.

It was a short wooden sword.

“This contains 4th-Gear’s Mukiti so we can set up the seals of heaven and earth.”

Just by holding it, the sword began releasing air.

As the wooden blade absorbed his exhaustion, he stuck it in the back of his belt.

That was the only preparation he needed to run.

With it finished, he looked across all of those around him.

“Now, here are your orders.”

He faced forward, where he could see the streets, the sky, white automatons, and white gods of war.

The enemy was everywhere.

But he did not hesitate and he spoke to the others without looking their way.

“Everyone, I am about to go meet Shinjou-kun, so I will be very busy. The Concept Core weapon bearers are to advance and beat down the enemy reinforcements. Everyone else is to help me reach Shinjou-kun.”

He crouched down, swung his arms back, and opened his mouth.

“Clear my way forward!”

With that shout, he began to run.

He ran west, where the Leviathan was visible in the distance.

He raced toward the person waiting for him.

He would connect the battlefield so that they would not give up.

He hit his full speed from step number one.

Chapter 23

“Our Reason”

Oh, how spoiled I am
To get to run to that precious person’s heart
Oh, how spoiled I am
To have that precious person run to my heart

●

Below the cloudy night was a city filled with light.

Two pairs of eyes viewed that Tokyo nightscape from a distant, elevated place.

They were watching from a raised part of Okutama's mountains.

Two old men stood on that dark field. One was short and the other was tall and bald.

The short one looked to the other one.

"Hey, Siegfried. 1st-Gear's out there, aren't they? You get going, too."

"How about you go, Hiba Ryuutetsu? Isn't your grandson out there?"

"That idiot Ryuuji will be fine. He won't die so easily."

Ryuutetsu let out a white sigh.

"I hear things have gotten complicated in there."

"Yes, I heard from Diana. She said Sayama needs to run."

"And you don't feel like helping him?"

"What about you?" shot back Siegfried.

The two of them continued viewing the night's landscape.

"Well, he'll probably manage somehow or another. Kaoru may not be around anymore, but…"

"But that Sayama has definitely inherited the villain's surname."

Siegfried suddenly started forward toward the base, where he would no longer be able to see the city.

Ryuutetsu frowned behind him.

"Hold on. The world might be destroyed and you aren't even going to watch it?"

"This fight has been left to the next generation. And Sayama has started to run, hasn't he? That may be the destiny of his surname. To run, to struggle, to grab at something…but to only reveal your true self to the one you care for most."

Siegfried looked up into the sky and his voice rang through the winter night.

"He is running toward the one to which he can entrust his true self. Kaoru and Asagi both failed and did not arrive in time, but the current Sayama will run enough for all three of them."

●

Sayama ran through Tokyo's night.

He had started southeast of Shinjuku, in the space between Minato and Koutou.

Inside the concept space, the eight pieces of the battlefield had been placed spatially in a line. If Sayama passed through them all, the land would return to its original layout.

That meant he had to start on Tokyo Bay's coast and make a full circuit of

Tokyo with Shinjuku in the center.

He was currently in the southeast of the fourth region. If Tokyo was viewed as a clock with Shinjuku in the center, he was around 4:30.

If he moved clockwise from there, he would start by heading southwest.

Region 5: South. Meguro.

Region 6: Southwest. Setagaya.

After running through there…

Region 7: West. Suginami.

As he took Circular Route 7 north from there, he would see Shinjuku to his right.

Region 8: Northwest. Nerima.

Region 1: North. Kita.

There, he would leave Circular Route 7 and start down the Nakasendo.

Region 2: Northeast. Arakawa.

Region 3: East. Sumida.

From there, he would be back where he had started.

It was a clockwise route in reality, but it was currently a straight shot.

It was approximately fifty kilometers in all.

Sayama sped up and checked his watch.

The current time was 9:48 PM. The positive concepts inside the Leviathan would be complete at 10:30.

He still needed a few minutes to reach the Leviathan after making it back to his original spot and he needed another sixteen minutes for the seals of heaven and earth. Which meant…

…I want to reach Shinjou-kun by at least 10:10.

He had twenty-two minutes until 10:10. To cover fifty kilometers in that time, he needed an average speed of greater than 110 kph.

As soon as he had finished that calculation, Mikoku's voice reached him via Noah in the sky.

"Doesn't it seem hopeless? It would be a lot easier to let the entire world be resurrected. In fact, if you have no possible way of arriving in time, then giving up would be the sensible thing to do."

"I see."

A decent suggestion, he concluded.

But he reached into his pocket as he continued to run.

The others running alongside him gave him concerned looks as he continued speaking.

"That is a decent suggestion. A wonderful suggestion even. But I have an even better idea."

Which was…

"I will complete this run and make you cry."

"Make me cry?"

"Do not get upset yet. I have not finished explaining my idea. …Are you

listening?”

He pulled his hand from his pocket, revealing a bundle of acceleration charms.

“I will not just make you cry. I will hit you, and hit you, and hit you some more. And only after I have made you bow down to the entire world, will I fill your eyes with tears. The crime of placing physical distance between Shinjou-kun and me deserves more than the death penalty. …It deserves the super death penalty.”

“You! Do you really think you can do that!? Do you really think you can run faster than one hundred kph, break through the attacks of my heavenly host, and reach the Leviathan!?”

“No one would ever think I could not!!” roared Sayama before laughing and crouching down. “I am the ruler of this world! The entire world wishes for my victory!! And…”

He activated the acceleration charms.

They opened behind his shoulders and legs, producing a blue light.

“Shinjou-kun is waiting and she is even more important than the world to me! I! *I!* **I** cannot possibly lose to something as trivial as an attempted change to the world!!”

…Yes, I cannot possibly lose!!

The speed arrived along with that thought.

The first step created an explosion of water vapor on the road’s surface.

“You!”

He ignored Mikoku’s words while gaining the speed of flight.

“You dare belittle the world!?”

He moved forward.

“Yes! The world is a little thing. But it is mine, so I will not let you have it. I am not leasing it out and I am not accepting loans! In fact, I cannot imagine why you want something so boring!”

He almost seemed to fly.

“After all, a world without any trace of ourselves would only be a blank slate! It would be no more valuable than an untouched canvas, null data, or an empty notebook! If any world is important…”

He tore through the wind.

“Then it is the world on which I and those with me have left our mark!!”

He pumped his arms.

“And if you will get in the way of that, I will make you cry! I will preserve this world and, while I am at it, I feel like declaring next year the first year of the St. Sayama Era and producing a calendar with twelve different photos of Shinjou-kun!”

He ran and he heard a voice from directly ahead.

“Fine then.”

“You agree I should make the calendar!? Then I will make sure to send you a copy!”

“Not that! I was complimenting your resolve!”

Mikoku’s words were accompanied by the appearance of white figures on the road ahead.

They were automatons, but they were Arch models, not the Angelus models.

“Our gatekeepers provide a harsh greeting!”

There were several dozen of them. They appeared with instantaneous acceleration and gravity already shimmered in front of their hands.

It only took them a moment.

“We will show you just how harsh it is! Over!”

Several of them charged toward him with the tremendous acceleration of their relative speeds.

Sayama did not hesitate; he raised his left fist as he ran.

That was when something unexpected happened. The automatons in front of him suddenly twisted apart in midair.

…*What was that?*

His surprised thoughts soon found the answer.

A man wearing black cut in up ahead.

The automatons took defensive stances.

“How crass!”

“If battle is crass, then my continent’s culture is the crassest in history!”

With those words, some people appeared from behind Sayama.

They were those who had been running with him, but the man in black ran up ahead of them all.

“I am Chinese UCAT Representative Chao Yu. I shall protect you until you leave Region 4!”

●

They passed Sayama and ran up ahead.

With the exception of the man named Chao, the fighters in white armored uniforms all had acceleration charms flying around them.

And there were many more than were around Sayama.

“Your bodies will not last if you use them like that!”

They replied to Sayama’s voice with smiles.

“This is the best we can do.”

“Yes.” Chao looked back toward Sayama. “That was quite the selfish speech earlier!”

But…

“But if the world is currently subject to such great influence, then it must be small indeed!! If every one of our actions can decide the course of the world, then this is precisely what my continent desires!!”

They picked up speed.

“We hold the world in our hands!!”

“Right!!”

The others raised their arms, lined up charms between their hands like cards, and activated them.

“Go get them!!”

With Chao Yu in the lead, they grew too fast to see and charged toward the Arch automatons.

They bet their own bodies on this simplistic and one-time-only acceleration.

They were not trying to win. They were only trying to…

“Slam into them!!”

That was exactly what happened.

In the instant before impact, they removed the 4th-Gear creatures on their backs.

The plant creatures landed and watched them leave.

“Good luck,” said the creatures.

The fighters responded with smiles and completed their charge.

The Arch automatons had the pure reaction speed necessary, but the collision happened while they were still trying to decide what to do.

With a solid sound of impact, bones broke and armor split.

But the men continued on to more and more collisions.

Chao Yu began to spin in the lead.

He seemed to create a whirlwind with his body and every automaton he touched was thrown into the air.

When the dolls slammed into the ground, they were unable to react to the spiral movement and they were broken to pieces.

“We’ll clear the way!”

But just as the last of the men collided with the last few automatons, some giant forms dropped down from the sky.

They were gods of war. A great rumble filled the asphalt as three Powers gods of war landed.

The giants quickly prepared to fight.

“Did you think you could break through with speed!?” they asked.

“Then we will show you our strength!”

Still in the lead, Chao Yu swung his arms while spinning.

“Chinese UCAT Bicycle Unit!!”

“Yes, sir!!”

Voices and wind lined up on either side of him.

They came from bicycles and people.

Two men in green armored uniforms were driving a bicycle each.

Both of them had a vertical stack of five men standing on their shoulders. This created a ten meter tower of men.

Up ahead, Chao made a leap with an acceleration charm in his mouth.

“We use the human body as strength and history as our will! We use the human body to feel no fear of battle and therein lies the foundation of our resolve!”

The men on the bicycles shouted in agreement and they all angled themselves on the shoulders of the one below them to look back toward Sayama.

“Fear not, boy! We will show you that nothing is impossible for mankind!”

They all activated the gravitational control charms in their hands.

The charms allowed them to use empty air like solid ground and Chao Yu was the first to begin running through midair.

At the same time, the bicycles began to rise and pick up speed.

Everyone on those accelerating bicycles could use the empty air as the ground.

“————!”

They slipped past the swords of the gods of war and the two towers of five people ran forward through the air.

Their outstretched fists performed powerful stomps in empty air.

“Shake!!”

With that word, Sayama saw the two bicycles pass between the legs of two of the three gods of war.

At the same time, a five-man strike slammed into the gods of war down their central line.

An intense sound rang out and the gods of war were destroyed.

Their pure white armor seemed to burst into sand, but they managed to remain standing.

“Go, boy!!”

The bicycles made a breaking turn and knocked the feet out from under the machines.

The angel gods of war were going to fall. Human strength had broken them and pulled them down to earth.

After destroying one of them on his own, Chao shouted back toward Sayama.

“You have my word! We cannot be heroes! But…”

Sayama faced forward and saw the man accelerate.

“I promise you we will clear the way for you!!”

“Testament!!”

●

“You have my thanks!!”

Sayama shouted to the comrades who remained with him and he accelerated.

As he ran, his watch had reached 9:52.

He had eighteen minutes left and seven regions to go. He was now entering Kazami’s Region 5.

But the enemy was flying through the sky.

They were the Prince automatons who fired projectiles instead of making direct attacks.

…*Here they come!*

An incredible number of white beams swept through the streets and raced

toward him.

Sayama responded by speeding up.

He added on more charms and charged toward the hundreds of overlapping and intersecting beams of light.

He could see a group of Angelus automatons beyond those beams, but…

“Don’t panic! You still have plenty of ground to cover, don’t you?”

Just as he wondered who this was, a military jeep drove up alongside him.

It bounced along the torn-up road as it did.

“Jord!?”

Mikoku’s voice reached them from the Leviathan.

“What are you doing here!?”

“Don’t be silly. It’s true I sympathized with you a little when you said you were brining Shino back to life. Shino was a good girl and she made me food. She was a good girl and never stopped being a good girl. I can understand why you’d want to bring her back. But…”

She swung her arms, pulled heavy machineguns from her sleeves, and aimed them into the sky.

“But I never asked you to bring the whole world back to life.”

Sayama watched as Jord stepped on the accelerator.

She charged through the cannon fire pouring from the sky.

But none of it hit her. It grazed her and tore into the jeep, but it never actually hit her.

“If you did that and brought everyone back…”

Jord fired. The gunfire rang out and cleared a path in the sky.

“That’d be returning the world to my original expectations!!”

The light from the sky tore into the jeep and it rolled onto its side.

But Jord jumped out.

She landed, rolled once, and fired her twin heavy machineguns into the sky from below the downpour of light.

“Have a taste of a real god’s bullets!! And…”

As she scattered gunfire into the heavens, the corner of her mouth rose in a smile.

“You’re Sayama, right? Are you a good boy?”

“Of course!”

As he passed her by, he recalled the past and held his chest.

“My parents always said so!!”

“Then I’ll help you out. …1st-Gear, you will too, won’t you!?”

At that moment, Sayama entered Brunhild’s Region 6.

A group of Angelus automatons had formed a solid wall up ahead, but…

“!?”

The winged ranks were blown away from below.

The wave-like blast spread and destroyed them in an instant.

There was a single cause: large shadows had suddenly appeared below their

feet.

…Half-dragons!

"Did you come to help me, 1st-Gear!?"

"Exactly!"

All of the shadows stood up at once.

"1st-Gear's half-dragon unit is here! I am Fafner, their representative member!!"

The wingless half-dragon explained what he had done to the angels' attack.

"Light-bringing wings also bring shadow. Nothing could be more perfect for those of us with shadow-walking techniques!!"

The half-dragons moved from shadow to shadow, making sudden appearances to fell their enemy. They then raised a hand, beckoning Sayama over.

"Open the way! Our negotiator is coming through!"

The enemy group was thick, but…

"Open the way!!"

Fafner's group carried out their orders while taking sword strikes and cannon blasts.

They cut through their foes with giant swords while taking powerful impacts to secure a central path.

"Bear with it! After all, this negotiator is the one who gave honor to Venerable Hagen!!"

With those words, they achieved a brief victory.

A path opened.

The way forward was clear.

Sayama ran through that passable space. He raced on through.

…Thank you.

He understood that everyone was responding to his serious side.

Shinjou had taught him that. If he was serious, then everyone would follow him.

In that case, he thought. *If they will respond to what little seriousness I have shown…*

…Can I trust that I will find something else like this later on?

He did trust in that fact.

And so he ran toward Shinjou who had given him that trust.

After passing the half-dragons, the dolls continued to push toward him as if collapsing down on him, but…

"Go! You haven't even made it halfway yet!"

He heard Fafner's group fighting behind him and he heard Jord's voice from even further back.

"Tatsumi! Alex! Can you hear me!?"

●

Inside the concept space set up at Tokyo Bay's wharf, the Top-Gear forces

heard Jord's voice over a communicator.

"How long are you going to sit there!?"

They were all sitting down, but Alex towered above them and Tatsumi sat beside him.

Tatsumi held a knife's grip in her trembling hand and she stared blankly up at the ceiling.

"I know you're on Mikoku's side. But! If you won't stop what she's doing now, are you really her ally!?"

Tatsumi suddenly opened her mouth.

"Did you think I didn't already know that?" she asked. "But I have no reason to stop her."

She raised the shaking knife in her hand but dropped it.

The metal produced a sharp noise when it hit the concrete floor.

The noise continued on like a tremor, but Tatsumi did not even look down at it.

"I don't have any strength left. What could I even do?"

She pressed her forehead against Alex.

And she stopped moving.

But she was listening to the sounds of battle coming from the communicator.

Everyone was trying to send a certain boy, one of those she had treated as an enemy, to Mikoku.

…*What are we supposed to do?*

"Mikoku only has Noah. And…she's supported by her feelings for Shino. If we turned against her, she'd be all alone."

"Tatsumi," said Alex. "I must take issue with part of that."

"Wh-what part?"

"Mikoku is not alone."

"Eh?"

Tatsumi's eyes opened wide and Alex clarified.

"That boy named Sayama said that Mikoku is another version of ourselves."

"D-doesn't that just mean she has enemies?"

"No," replied Alex. "Tatsumi, was the boy named Hiba Ryuuji nothing more than an enemy to you? Was he an enemy you could never understand and who you had to reject? Also…"

After pausing to think, he asked a question.

"Did you cry when he rejected you?"

"——————"

Tatsumi was dumbfounded, so Alex said even more.

"Now, what do you think, Tatsumi? Is Mikoku alone? Or does she stand on a battlefield where no one can reject her? Which is it? And…"

He asked another question.

"Aren't you rejecting her now?"

That question was followed by a voice. It was Mikoku's coming from the

communicator.

“What is the matter, Sayama? It seems you have passed the midpoint, but you are running a little behind.”

The girl’s provocation was belied by the weakness in her voice.

“You do seem to be enjoying yourself with your comrades assisting you, but you are not going to make it in time at this rate.”

●

A certain will responded to Mikoku.

But it did not come from Sayama as he ran. It came from Shinjou, far below Mikoku.

“That isn’t true!! He’ll definitely make it in time!!”

With the others around her, Shinjou checked her watch while firing Ex-St at the flying enemies.

It was precisely ten o’clock.

Sayama had passed through Region 7 and was about to pass though Region 8. That was the midpoint of his journey.

…He will make it, won’t he?

She looked back and saw the distant concentration of cannon fire and explosions that indicated his location.

He was approaching at full speed.

But it was true he had used up twelve of his twenty-two minutes on reaching the midpoint.

He was about one minute slow. Even if she assumed he had needed to pick up some speed at the beginning, he did seem to be running behind.

But even so…

“He’ll definitely make it in time!!”

“How!?”

Mikoku’s question reached her from atop the Leviathan’s head.

She stood there in her black armored uniform and seemed directly overhead despite the great distance between them.

“How can you be so sure!?”

“Because…”

…That’s obvious!

Shinjou continued firing and felt heat on her cheeks from the surrounding burning buildings.

“If he isn’t going to make it in time, he’ll find a way to make it!!”

She knew everyone had to be thinking the same thing.

“Even if he isn’t going to make it, he won’t give up! If he isn’t going to make it, he’ll do whatever it takes to make sure he makes it! …Did you know this!?”

After grabbing Ex-St’s overheated barrel and tossing it aside, Shinjou spread her hands.

She raised those hands toward the Leviathan.

“The character for ‘struggle’ is supposed to look like someone pushing back up against a great pressure bearing down on them! And the word ‘resistance’ adds the character for ‘low’ to it because you have to be down low to put up a resistance!!”

“Then!” Mikoku seemed to be testing her. “Can you truly put up a resistance against my efforts to keep him away and against the almighty power at my disposal!?”

With her voice as the command, the ring of angels around the Leviathan began to shake.

They were coming. With the gods of war and mechanical dragons in the center, the great army of angels was approaching.

“Shinjou, if you are what Sayama desires, then you are the same as him.”

“Eh!?”

Shinjou carelessly dropped the new barrel she was trying to attach to Ex-St.

“I-I’m not that weird! I’m not like him!”

A moment later, her cellphone rang in her pocket.

She answered it and heard that weird boy’s voice with cannon fire in the background.

“Hello, Shinjou-kun. Bonjour. …Now, my heart was feeling a little lonely as I ran, so I am making various phone calls to harass people and cheer me up.”

“Can I just hang up?”

“You do love saying the opposite of what you really think, don’t you!?”

She seriously considered hanging up.

…But he must be having a hard time. Maybe I should actually speak with him.

“So what do you need? I’m kind of busy right now.”

“I imagine you are,” he agreed. “I am about to build a virtual Shinjou-kun in my mind and create a number of imaginary derivative works as I make my way there. So might I have the rights to your likeness?”

She hung up.

She exhaled, lowered her head a bit, lifted her gaze, and looked all the way up to the Leviathan.

“Th-that doesn’t count. It doesn’t, okay?”

“What doesn’t?” Mikoku sighed. “Regardless, it is already too late. If you claim you can make it in time or fight back, then show me, old world!”

With those words, Shinjou felt a wind from directly ahead.

It was the wind of pure-white gods of war charging forward as if sliding along at low altitude.

The air shook and about a dozen of them approached.

“Kh…”

She felt their intimidating presence.

A god of war’s size alone provided strength. If a dozen of them used their wings to rush in with swords and shields at the ready, it would form an even

nastier attack than any kind of shell.

The 3rd-Gear forces could oppose them, but they were in Region 1. That was too far away from here.

Shinjou's group would have to fight them on their own, so she shouted to the others.

"Fall back!"

She attached Ex-St's barrel and raised the weapon.

"————!!"

In that instant, the wind of giants flowed forward on either side of her.

…Eh?

She looked up and saw silver gods of war. These steel gods of war were equipped with shields and spears.

She did not recognize them, but their shields bore the French flag.

The one to her right seemed to be the commander and it turned back toward her.

"I apologize for our delay, but our air transport was slow. …French UCAT's god of war battalion will now join the battle."

The wind whipped up as the silver gods of war opened the three wing-shaped thrusters on their backs.

"Everyone, we have three minutes and twenty-seven seconds of flight time. Do not actually fly. The enemy will come to strike us on the ground. We will stick to Battle Scenario 3. Use your wings to accelerate and never stop moving."

A bitter laugh rang out.

"We were hoping to surprise Germany, Japan, and the US, but we never thought our first battle would be enough to surprise the entire world."

"That's right," replied a female voice. "Make sure to gather plenty of enemy heads."

"Ready your spears!!"

They raised their spears while facing forward.

"Local commander, give us our orders!!"

Shinjou realized they meant her.

"U-um…"

She panicked, but managed to breathe out and raise Ex-St.

She aimed the cannon toward the flying gods of war.

"Charge!!"

Just as the white light of her blast tore through a god of war, the silver armored warriors accelerated.

●

Noah maintained a constant understanding of the battle.

She checked the situation in each location as well as the transparent map of Tokyo displayed on the Leviathan's head.

“Mikoku-sama, there is one thing I do not understand.”

The enemy’s numbers were definitely being worn down. The same was true of the angels. The ratio between armies remained largely unchanged. Even with the enemy reinforcements, she had sent a third army to deal with that second enemy army. And yet…

“Where do the enemy’s sudden bursts of strength come from? Over.”

When she looked through the wind of their high altitude, Noah saw something unexpected.

Mikoku gave a certain expression in front of the transparent map.

…A bitter smile?

She did not know. No, she did think she knew.

She remembered.

○ **“Before” June 21, 1989**

The expression on her creator’s face was a smile, yet Noah could not understand it.

○ **“Before” March 20, 1993**

Noah gained a single joy.

The concept creation facility was remade and the negative concepts were to be created.

○ **“Before” March 20, 1993**

Noah once more saw the indecipherable smile on her creator’s face.

○ **“Before” March 20, 1993**

Noah asked her creator what that smile meant.

Her creator replied thusly:

“Oh… Sorry about that. It isn’t a bad thing. It’s something of a habit.”

○ **December 25, 2005**

Mikoku made the same smile.

So Noah asked a question.

“What does that smile mean? Over.”

Mikoku brought a hand to her face and seemed to hold her mouth.

“Oh. Sorry,” she said. “It is not a bad thing. It is something of a habit I have picked up recently.”

Noah did not understand, but she concluded that must be what it was.

That smile was not a bad thing, but it required an apology.

After leaving her understanding and investigation there, she asked something else. She repeated a question Mikoku had not heard because she was lost in thought.

“Mikoku-sama, give me my orders. Order me to suppress the enemy. Over.”

“Yes.” Mikoku looked down below. “What time is it?”

“It is 10:06 PM. Over.”

“And where is Sayama?”

As soon as Mikoku asked, the two of them saw pillars of light falling through the gaps in the cloudy sky.

More and more hammers of light pounded on the ground.

“Is that…?”

“That is from Region 2 in the northeast! That must be the Heavenly Moon Bow, so is 2nd-Gear there!?”

At some point, Sayama had advanced into the last two regions.

“Noah!”

Noah listened to Mikoku’s shout.

“How much power do you have in reserve!?”

●

Sayama ran.

The older members of 2nd-Gear had just helped him and he was moving into the neighboring Region 3.

The current time was 10:08. He had two minutes left.

If he was going to make it, it would only be just barely.

He knew he had to hurry.

…There is nothing to worry about.

He felt inexplicable confidence.

Then he realized that water vapor was trailing from different parts of his body.

Mukiti’s wooden sword was producing a cloud of water vapor from where he had placed it on the back of his waist.

As he continued onward, he produced a contrail along the ground.

He raced forward.

He was almost flying as he followed his straight-line path.

Tsukuyomi’s Heavenly Moon Bow was tearing into the airborne enemies from the side.

His feet took him into Region 3. This was the final region.

Mukiti was refreshing most of his exhaustion, but that did not mean he was not at all exhausted.

If Mukiti went all out, Sayama’s body would lose all of its heat and freeze.

Also, he needed a certain level of body heat to run.

If he could not keep his blood pumping, he could not run.

To keep that blood flowing, Mukiti was taking heat with extreme caution.

But some remained. He was far better off than if he had run fifty kilometers at over one hundred kph with no preparation whatsoever, but he did feel some exhaustion.

He was sweating, he was out of breath, and his body was stiff.

He dodged enemy attacks as he ran with such great speed. When he noticed how torn up the road surface was, his pulse started racing and he felt something bitter in the bottom of his stomach.

Mukiti forcibly took those things away, but they remained in his heart.

He had felt this bitterness several times on the way here.

And, he thought. *I would not feel this bitterness if I did not run.*

…Yes.

Wherever he ran, the others would gather and be injured.

If he did not run, none of the others would be injured.

Wasn't he simply causing trouble for the others in his conceited villain act?

…What am I doing here?

Amid this great battle, he alone ran and he alone thought.

It was true he had no time, but he ignored that and ran.

…What am I doing?

He had two minutes left and seven kilometers to go.

At 110 kph, he could only travel about 3.7 kilometers in two minutes.

It was obvious he would not make it.

And yet he was running.

Shinjou was waiting for him.

Why was he running and why was she waiting? It was so blatantly hopeless.

He felt it was all ridiculous.

He also thought he should just quit.

He felt it would all be so much easier if he gave up.

But a sudden opening appeared before him.

The road was completely empty.

That was the result of Heo and American UCAT's fight in Region 3.

They had pushed their front line so far forward that both enemy and ally had vanished from the road.

This place was his and his alone.

There was nothing there. Only the transparent night sky, the air, the earth, and the unseen way ahead.

"_____"

He suddenly felt as if only he were here.

Only that which was inside him existed at the moment.

His pulse.

His energy.

His mind.

His feelings.

His will.

His movement.

There was no other noise in the space ahead to interfere with the glorious song those things produced.

His whole body was here and he could feel his nerves reaching all the way to his extremities.

Speed more sharply grasped him.

He was the only thing here. And the awareness of himself this place gave him allowed him to realize something.

He realized what beyond himself he wanted the most.

He thought of that person.

“———!!”

And he came to his senses.

He faced forward and found the battlefield he needed to run across.

He had this entire space to himself and there was no one but him here.

No one would see what he did here.

He could stop running if he wanted.

But…

“———!!”

He activated charms behind him.

He split the wind.

He continued forward.

With this full power sprint, he used this moment when no one was watching to produce his greatest speed yet.

He ran and he knew exactly why he was running.

“Shinjou-kun!!” he shouted. “I want to see you as soon as possible!”

●

“Then this is the end, Sayama Mikoto!!”

Mikoku swung her arm on top of the Leviathan.

“How will you overcome this greatest of reasons to give up!?”

At the same time, Noah swung her arm in the same way.

The Leviathan moved. Specifically, one of the five meter caliber secondary cannons on its side did.

“Fire! Over!”

White light pierced into the earth.

The blast would annihilate everything over a diameter of five hundred meters.

That area happened to be the empty space through which Sayama was running.

●

Sayama sped up.

The cannon of light landed after being fired from the western sky to his right.

The explosive blast rushed toward him.

But he did not give up. He kept running as if to escape the blast.

Hurry. Hurry, he told himself twice to push himself even faster.

His footsteps rang loud and his speed transformed his surroundings into a blur.

I can make it, he told himself.

Think.

There has to be a way to make it.

Build your confidence by thinking through each and every reason why I am sure to make it.

Yes.

For example, I am smart.

I am decently athletic.

I am a skilled orator and I know how to grasp the human heart.

My heart is pure. After all, I am someone Shinjou-kun chose to spend her time with.

And if my heart is pure, then my looks and body must share that pure beauty.

I can confidently pose in front of the bathroom mirror each morning.

Yes, if no one had seen me as that lecherous old man's grandson, I would have lived a very different life.

I would have become an art model and revolutionized the history of the world's art.

Yes, I may have a reserved personality with no hint of megalomania, but the world's artists and sculptors would have transformed me into art and the world would have been filled with me.

The world's parks would have been overflowing with statues of me.

I would have conquered that peeing boy and led to a handsome peeing boy or handsome peeing man based on me.

No, the word "peeing" must not be in the title. That would be horrendously inappropriate! The title would be the Handsome Boy or the Handsome Man which would of course be me.

But as a fountain, I would certainly have to keep the action intact. Perhaps setting it up to produce a rainbow would be best.

I bet it would shock everyone if the water started coming from the mouth at night.

And what pose should the statue make? Like this? Or this? No, like this! I could place my hands on my hips and lean back a bit or maybe place my hands behind my head and thrust the important part forward. The pedestal would need to be engraved with a quote of mine. Maybe "Ah, Sh-Shinjou-kun! Look, look!!" would be best. Building those around the world would certainly be a magnificent project.

Oh, what a wonderful future it would be if Shinjou-kun and I could have a picnic in front of one of my long-distance firing statues.

…Oh? There is an explosion to the right.

"————!!"

Sayama confirmed his own perfection as he ran.

Pursued by the shockwave, he launched himself further forward.

At the same time, he saw something reaching the empty manmade field up ahead.

"Now you get here!?"

A moment later, the explosive blast enveloped the area.

●

Shinjou saw a great explosion of light swallow up the area to her north.

The wind blew and the sky was filled with trees and manmade objects.

The wind was powerful enough for the surrounding angels and gods of war to stir.

A roar filled the sky and the winged group there was washed away.

Shinjou's watch said they had one minute left.

If he had been on his way, he would have been right where that light had been.

"Sayama-kun!"

She then heard a voice. Naturally, it was not Sayama's.

"Well, Shinjou!? How does it feel to know Sayama was just blown away!?"

But Shinjou had a question about Mikoku's voice.

…Eh?

Her tone was forceful, but her voice felt somehow weak.

…Why?

Only then did Shinjou realize the answer: that girl was losing something.

"Mikoku-san…"

She represented emotion. She was trying to grant the desire of all the entire world's emotions.

But at the same time…

"Is it sad to lose something? Even if they're an enemy and even if winning means you can revive the world, do you not want to lose anything!?"

Shinjou asked her question of the windy sky. She spoke to Mikoku who was protected by the angels.

"Do you…not want to lose this world!?"

And…

"Is it because you don't want to lose it that you're going to make sure it is lost and then create a world with no more death!?"

"Shinjou."

She received a response.

"Do not say that. …You will dull my resolve."

And…

"All I can do is move my emotions. …Even when it comes to you."

Something arrived through the raging wind.

It was a great dragon wrapped in flames. It was a six-winged Seraph mechanical dragon.

It passed over the heads of the French UCAT gods of war.

"Dammit!!"

The gods of war cried out as the mechanical dragon flew above Shinjou. Its fire-breathing mouth was opened and its blazing main cannon was already ready to fire.

“Shinjou.”

The dragon spoke with Mikoku’s voice as it glared at her in warning.

“Sayama is waiting for you.”

The mouth opened. The flames of the main cannon were coming.

But Shinjou breathed in.

“No.”

…There’s no way Sayama-kun is waiting for me!

Thirty meters above her, she saw the conflagration building.

“I’m the one waiting for him!”

A moment later, the Seraph mechanical dragon exploded.

It had not been hit by a cannon blast or a sword strike.

“Eh?”

Confused, Shinjou saw flames surging around the explosive noise.

With serpentine movements, massive flames wrapped around and burned the dragon.

And below that dragon-shaped torch, Shinjou lowered her head.

On the asphalt ground, she saw sand and stones.

Those minerals were moving.

“Do not worry.”

It was Wanambi.

The mechanical dragon was entirely reduced to ash and a dragon of blazing heat was created in its place. This dragon of shimmering heat distorted the surrounding light into seven colors.

The Messengers of Wanambi contained a concept that made heat a living being and Shinjou had brought them with her for the seals of heaven and earth.

“Do not worry” “Protect” “Will protect” “Shinjou” “Important” “Person”

The shimmering dragon landed near Shinjou and glared at their surroundings to protect her.

With her head still lowered, Shinjou opened her mouth.

“Mikoku-san… You’re wrong.”

In the wind, the cannon blasts and clashing swords were the forest and the shaking was the earth.

“Why do you have to lose everything if you don’t want to lose anything? Wouldn’t you be the last one to want that? And if so…then you’re wrong!”

“Then are you saying you’re right?”

Shinjou shook her head.

“I don’t know. But…the person I care for the most says I am.”

She breathed in.

“That person is always wrong, but I know he actually wants to be right. I know he wants to be right but always tasks himself with being wrong!”

“You mean…”

“He is a villain!!”

She raised her head and reached her hand toward the cloudy sky.

“I will call the name of my precious villain! If I do that, he will rush to my side no matter where he is and he will tell me I am right! And I will tell him he is wrong but right. And because I know that, he can be wrong without worrying. So…so come to me, my villain! No matter how many worlds away you might be, come to me!”

The watch on her raised hand said it was 10:10.

At that moment, she gave a shout.

“Sayama-kun!!”

Her cry received two responses.

First, her outstretched hand was grabbed from above.

“I am here. And…”

Second, the owner of an out-of-breath voice spoke to her.

“Now, let us continue on together, Shinjou-kun.”

She was pulled up toward heaven.

Shinjou gave a tearful smile toward the source of that pull.

“Yes,” she called. “We’ll be together forever, Sayama-kun.”

At the same time, the world was reconnected.

“————!!”

Tokyo returned to its original form around them.

The eight-directional battlefield was back.

●

As the land reconnected, Shinjou saw what Sayama was riding and what she had been pulled onto.

“Thunder Fellow?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

The blue and white mechanical dragon carried a long cannon below it.

Shinjou moved up next to Sayama and felt the shimmering dragon approaching her again.

“Wh-why is Heo here?”

“Did you not notice, Shinjou-kun? I had to arrive by 10:10.”

Sayama pointed behind him.

Far behind them were walls of light with a large circle at the bottom.

…Those are the surrounding walls of the eight-direction seal.

“Those walls needed sixty-four minutes to create. In other words, 10:04. And now that they are complete, the bearers of the Concept Cores are free to leave their region.”

“Then…”

“Yes,” replied Harakawa as he opened the canopy. “That idiot called us, saying he was feeling lonely. He asked if anyone was free.”

“I only did so just in case, but that may have been the right decision. Then again, I am confident I could have outrun that explosion had I kept running.”

“Keep dreaming.”

When Harakawa closed the canopy, Shinjou exchanged a bitter smile with Sayama.

The two of them then looked up into the heavens.

“Another twenty minutes until the positive concepts are complete. But we need sixteen minutes to set up the seals of heaven and earth. That means we only have four minutes to reach the Leviathan.”

Heo responded to Sayama.

“Leave that to us. We’ll get you there. After all…this is the mission my dad left for me.”

“Then we are counting on you, Heo Thunderson-kun. So…shall we go, Shinjou-kun?”

“Yes, let’s go, Sayama-kun.”

Shinjou pulled on his arm and nodded.

…Let’s go to fight.

“Let’s go stop Mikoku-san. After all…”

She looked him in the eye.

“She’s aching.”

He did not answer her, but he did give a small nod.

“Heo-kun, take us to the Leviathan at your new-rider fare.”

“Of course!!”

With that, Thunder Fellow moved slowly forward.

A ring of enemies was visible up above, but in the span of a breath, Thunder Fellow picked up speed with Shinjou and Sayama crouched low on his back.

They flew in a straight line toward the Leviathan.

●

Everyone running through the battlefield saw it.

In the center of the sky, a straight white contrail ascended through the wing-filled night.

It was Thunder Fellow.

“Go,” someone muttered while grabbing an angel automaton by the neck and slamming her to the ground. “Please get there!!”

As the others watched in agreement, many wings descended to stop the mechanical dragon.

They were the Leviathan’s defenders, primarily made up of Seraph mechanical dragons.

That force of several thousand approached the rising contrail, but no one uttered a single word of worry.

Just like the enemy, they were releasing their own forces.

Two sets of wings flew up from the earth below.

One was the wings of a girl with a spear.

The other was the four-wings of a black god of war with a boy on its shoulder.

As the enemies flew above and the Leviathan began to move its secondary

cannons, the girl and black god of war moved apart. They waved casually toward the blue and white dragon.

“We’ll clear the way, Sayama! Shinjou!!”

“Try to be a little thankful, you stupid underclassman!!”

“Of course.” The boy on the blue and white dragon’s back spoke to the two rising sets of wings. “We will leave this to you…to Team Leviathan.”

●

With Izumo on its shoulder, Susamikado flew toward the Leviathan in an arc.

The Leviathan’s secondary cannons were moving.

Their target was the blue and white mechanical dragon.

So Hiba asked Mikage to raise the output of their wings. He had a single way of asking her.

“Mikage-san!”

“Nn.”

It would be easy to call it a tacit understanding. She responded to his call by boosting the wings on Susamikado’s back.

…Here we go!

For a fifteen kilometer mechanical dragon, even its secondary cannons could be one hundred meters long.

They could barely feel their speed due to the size of the object they were approaching.

“Here comes the enemy!”

Just as Izumo had said, gods of war flew from a hatch on top of the Leviathan.

They were the Lords model. It was the same model used against them when they had pursued the Leviathan before.

There were four of them and their relative speed was so great it left them nearly impossible to see.

But Hiba still charged in.

He did not rely on his sped-up vision.

“Race, my heart!”

He could feel his entire body. He kept his mind on the flowing wind and the flowing movements of the enemy.

In his battle with Tatsumi, he had gained a technique to receive any power. He used that technique to sense every kind of “flow”.

The battle had no end. He did not even think about his own victory.

He brought everything he had learned to the next level.

…I will keep the dance of battle going!

He did not predict his enemy’s movements. After deciding which flow of motion seemed best, he constructed that motion with a focus on his interactions with the other participant.

Instead of thinking five or ten steps ahead, he thought every step ahead as he moved.

It only lasted an instant.

The four pure-white gods of war swung their twin blades toward the black god of war from countless angles.

“————————”

He only took a light step. He only spun around and jumped once into the air.

But by twisting his body, turning his side, raising his wings, turning his head, sweeping his arms around, and keeping his thoughts on moving ever forward, not one of the blades even grazed him.

At the same time, the Leviathan fired one of its secondary cannons in the center of his vision.

The air shook and the two meter shell of light flew toward him, but those in the sky did not panic.

But they did take action.

Hiba and Mikage spun around to send Izumo to the right.

A spray of metallic noise filled the air as the boy prepared his attack on Susamikado’s palm.

“V-Sw, final form!”

“Right away.”

The cowling expanded and fixed itself in midair.

When it fired at 120% output, it did not produce the pillar of light of its third form.

It was a blade.

The thick blade was over five hundred meters long.

“Ohhhhhh!!”

The sky was split apart.

The four Lords models took evasive action, but they could not escape the size of the blade.

In that one strike, dozens of approaching gods of war blossomed like midair flowers.

But those humanoid machines had not been Izumo’s target.

Hiba saw Izumo twist around to build up more speed.

“Izumo is up to bat! He’s going for a powerful swing here…”

Izumo swung his massive blade toward the ball of light fired by the Leviathan’s secondary cannon.

“Cla-claaaang!!”

His “bat” produced a tremendous noise as it hit the “baseball”.

“It’s flying right back at the pitcher! At this rate…”

It struck the Leviathan.

The armor covering several hundred meters of its port side dented in and a shockwave struck its giant form. The smaller pieces of armor were instantly peeled away and scattered through the winter sky like snow.

“Homerun!!”

The giant mechanical dragon leaned back a bit and Hiba did not overlook this

chance.

After placing Izumo back on his shoulder, he flew up in an uppercut-like arc.

“Keravnos!!”

The twenty meter pile bunker appeared on his black right arm.

The bolts drove satisfyingly into place and he raised the weapon toward the Leviathan’s upper secondary cannons.

He fired.

The upper armor was something like an anti-air shrine, but the two kilometer blast of lightning destroyed it.

“Go!!”

The Leviathan had already bent a bit from the “baseball” hit, so it truly did twist around this time.

Susamikado then passed through the spreading electrical discharge and headed down.

It needed to intercept the mechanical dragons flying up after Thunder Fellow.

“Chisato!” shouted Izumo from the shoulder. “Get them!”

He raised his voice toward the pair of wings battling the mechanical dragons around the Leviathan.

“Get them! I know you can do it!!”

●

Kazami heard Izumo as she fought the mechanical dragons.

Her enemies were Seraph models. That was the same model that had attacked Thunder Fellow when they had pursued the Leviathan.

They were fast and their flames burned through everything.

Kazami however used the sharp turns of her wings to toy with the Seraph models.

They came at her in a group, so decided where to position herself among them all. She chose a spot where they could not attack her but she could attack them.

Her wings carried her quickly, but she also spread them and broke them to brake.

This was much like her battle with Alex.

But, she thought. *That battle was a lot tougher.*

…No, that isn’t it.

All battles were tough by definition.

If she did not predict what the enemy would do and then fight back, she would die.

But this battle felt easier than the one with Alex.

And yet it may have been just as difficult.

The discrepancy was easily explained.

“It’s because I’ve experienced so many battles.”

She had forgotten how she had worked her way through so many enemies.

I still have a long way to go, she decided as she flipped through the wind.

Many different concepts were in effect here.

Her Kazami surname activated and so did her Chisato given name.

So she saw the wind and she flapped her wings to instantly travel great distances.

And she flew.

She flew toward one of the Seraph models.

“!”

She suddenly shattered her own wings to lower her speed.

She used their relative speed to drive her spear into it.

The spear struck the joint actuator at the base of a wing.

For a fighter jet or a mechanical dragon, that was a delicate part that could not attack.

Destroying it even a little would cause the dragon to lose control for a brief moment.

And in this confused dogfight, a single moment could be fatal. Some of them crashed into others and broke apart when she did this.

The enemies then kept their distance and fired a barrage at her.

But Kazami could see even that.

This enemy’s speed was greater than any she had seen before.

So was their mobility.

And the number of their attacks.

And the density of this barrage.

…But so what?

Even if it had not been on this level, she had fought against great powers before.

For projectiles of light, she had fought the Heavenly Moon Bow.

For a barrage, she had fought Cottus.

For high-speed combat, she had fought Alex.

And she had fought Brunhild recently.

She had also fought other gods of war, mechanical dragons, and non-humans.

Even if this enemy had the greatest specs she had seen, her combat experience was far greater.

She had very nearly died several times.

…And I nearly lost someone important to me.

“But you don’t even have that!”

Kazami spun around as she flew.

To drive away the Seraph models, she moved behind them, struck them, and looked down to her hands.

The value on the console had surpassed 100%.

She had built up that power by fighting without firing or accelerating.

What could she do now?

She matched her timing to a rotating Seraph model and kicked its side armor.

…Take a great jump.

She took a several hundred meter back step and saw countless mechanical dragons and angels in the sky.

They were all firing on her in unison.

The rumbling tremor she heard was created by thousands of projectiles. The light seemed to form a cloud.

But Kazami smiled as she raised G-Sp2.

There was a certain attack this situation allowed her.

“G-Sp2, final form.”

She operated the device. She placed a hand on the console, raised her eyebrows, and looked to the great enemy army and its attacks.

“Go!”

“Roger that.”

She immediately spelled out “Gungnir” with the console’s buttons and then added more letters.

“T-I-T-A-N-I-C-L-A-N-C-E! Titanic Lance!”

She fired a dragon of light into the sky.

But that dragon that had brought about the demise of the gods followed Kazami’s instructions by returning to its original form.

Instead of a raging dragon of destruction, it took on the true form it wanted.

It became a giant spear.

The body was that of a dragon, but the head was sharply pointed and its body extended straight backwards.

Kazami saw the giant white spear race through the sky.

It struck.

The dragon instantly turned thousands of enemies into explosions of light as it pierced through them and decorated the sky with light.

The remaining enemies were destroyed by a white blast from below.

Thunder Fellow had fired its Vesper Cannon.

The heavens shook and the enemies covering the Leviathan vanished.

The path to the battlefield was clear.

●

At 10:14, two patterns appeared to support two lights fired from the Leviathan.

One circle covered the heavens above and the other covered the earth below.

The patterns of white light began to rotate.

Supported by the sealing barriers in the surrounding eight directions, the two patterns rapidly took form as soon as they appeared.

But…

“Another sixteen minutes.”

Everyone knew that the two supporting those circles had arrived on the Leviathan.

And they also knew the bearer of the Leviathan was also there.

“We’re about the have the answer!”
At the same time, white light flew up above the Leviathan.
Thunder Fellow had left the great mechanical dragon.

Chapter 24

“Two Battles”

I understand
I really do
So
Please

●

Sayama stood in a large field located high in the sky.

There was green grass below his feet.

A white open-air bell tower was located at the far end of the field.

There were trees on either side and the pallets sealing the Concept Cores sat beyond them.

This Concept Core creation facility was made from Noah's residential area.

It was located on the roof at the base of the Leviathan's wings.

The sky was cloudy, but the field was somehow brightly lit.

Sayama felt Shinjou's presence behind him and he saw his enemy in front of him.

Mikoku wore a black armored uniform and the automaton had white wings.

There was no wind and the sounds of battle no longer reached them. He asked a question within that silent green and white.

"You are not made of salt, I take it?"

Mikoku gave a small smile.

"I am not in the habit of giving salt to guests."

"Guests, are we?"

"Yes. Everyone is a guest."

Sayama listened as she continued.

"After all, everyone will be leaving me."

"I see," he muttered.

Before he could think of what to say, the most natural words left his mouth.

"I will make you cry."

Mikoku's expression quickly changed to one of slight surprise.

"Was that your emotion?"

"No. I have something to teach you. That is all."

Sayama drew Mukiti's wooden sword from his waist.

"Both sides have a single condition for victory. For us, it is to use the Concept Cores to preserve the seals of heaven and earth until 10:30. That will reject the Leviathan's positive concepts as fakes and prevent their creation. Your plan to release the immortality concept and create a new world will be stopped and we will win."

"Ours is the opposite. We must defeat you to stop the seals of heaven and earth before 10:30. The Leviathan can complete its positive concepts and renew the world."

Sayama nodded.

"Basically, it comes down to which side is still standing come 10:30."

He held the wooden sword up in both Georgiuses and the weapon seemed to waver.

It was a watery mist.

Mukiti's body was escaping the wooden sword and creating a transparent

blade.

That blade would freeze and break through anything around it.

At the same time, a dragon of heat stood up around Shinjou.

“Sayama-kun.”

He heard her voice.

“You’re aching, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he replied.

Mikoku was drawing a sword up ahead.

Noah was spreading her wings behind the girl.

Noah was surrounded by freezing and blowing water vapor as well as shimmering heat and gravity.

Mikoku could swing her blade and Noah could produce any kind of attack, but…

“Shinjou-kun.”

Sayama removed his right hand from his wooden sword.

“Take this.”

He tossed her the right Georgius.

“Ah,” she said as she caught it. “U-um, but this…”

“No need to be embarrassed. …We will fight together. That is what this means, Shinjou-kun.”

He then prepared to fight. He faced Mikoku and Noah with his water sword raised to the left.

“Is there any need to name ourselves?”

Mikoku responded by shaking her head.

In that instant, the four of them began to move.

●

There was sound.

It filled the wide places on the battlefield, the narrow places, the center, and the corners. It was everywhere.

The clashing of power naturally produced sound.

There were voices as well.

They were the singing voices of automatons. In addition to Noah herself, the dolls, gods of war, and mechanical dragons on the battlefield were singing along with their leader.

They sang throughout the battlefield.

“Listen. Please listen.”

Their voices continued.

“In this world of rapid creation and destruction,

“The one and only invariable rule is the irreversibility of destruction.”

They sang loudly.

“The worlds began as only one.

“But the great numbers they created brought only more destruction.”

Their voices reverberated around them.
“Birth is the error leading to destruction.
“Growth is the syntax leading to destruction.
“And destruction is the absolute endcode.”
They cried out.
“This world has an ending.
“This world has no birth.
“This world will continue to end.
“It cannot continue to give birth.”
It grew to a roar.
“The sky.
“The moon.
“The stars.
“The sea.
“The earth.
“The wind.
“The flowers.
“And even light, sound, and the wills of mankind.
“If anything will not be destroyed, please tell us.”
Their voices seemed to split apart.
“At a random point of this world of destruction.”
As if they longed for something.
“I am living.”
No.
“I am searching for the answer.”
They *were* longing for something.
“And I am always aching!”

●

Shinjou fired without end.
She supported the overheated barrel with the Georgius on her right hand.
That negative Georgius provided a certain power to the shimmering serpent protecting her.
…The power of the opposite!
That opposite power reversed the dragon’s heat and cooled the barrel.
“Weird” “Diet” “Ticked” “Duel” “Leave it to me”
During the high speed battle, the game of shiritori being played on top of Ex-St never stopped.
But the speed with which they wrote out the words told Shinjou that Wanambi was building momentum.
Their target was Noah.
Shinjou was shooting down every single bullet and attack that Noah fired.
She would not allow anything to interfere with Sayama and Mikoku who

fought between her and Noah.

She switched between straight shots and scatter shots with the C button.

Normal shots used the A button and a blast using all of the built up energy used the B button.

Her shots tore, tore, pierced, and scattered.

Whenever Noah targeted her, she would evade.

She took the smallest dodge necessary. She never made any exaggerated movements.

She spotted the enemy bullets and spun around, allowing those bullets to pass below her skirt and shoulder armor guards.

But none of those counted as a hit.

…If it doesn't hit you, you don't lose a life!

It took experience to have an instinctual understanding of something that seemed so obvious.

She continued playing.

What is the most fundamental and beautiful type of play-through? she asked herself.

She knew the answer.

"A one-coin victory!!"

She fired.

Noah responded by deflecting the white cannon's attacks with gravity barriers.

And that was not all.

When Noah swung her arms, spheres of light appeared.

The bluish-white spheres of lightning were three meters wide, she continually threw them to either side, and they quickly surrounded the green battlefield.

There were sixty-three in all.

Noah then held her right hand forward.

"Begin targeting!"

Shinjou realized red reticles had appeared on the grass at her feet.

An attack was coming. The sixty-three lightning spheres were going to fire on her.

"————!!"

Shinjou did not hesitate. She fired and did so while rotating Ex-St behind herself.

She destroyed the closest lightning sphere behind her, creating a hole in the lightning formation.

…That gives me a safe zone!!

終わりのクロニクル

She aimed Ex-St toward the approaching bundles of lightning while jumping through the gap behind her.

She took a back step.

Her sights were already turned toward the bundles of lightning targeting her.

Moving behind the lightning spheres restricted the enemy's angle of fire. The closest one and the next eight on either side could no longer fire on her.

The enemy could use a total of forty-six lightning cannons.

Shinjou fought back.

And as she fired, the bluish-white light shattered.

The light sprayed up into the sky.

She could only hear her own breathing as she rapidly tapped the A button.

Then Noah began to move. To throw off Shinjou's aim, she had the sixty-two lightning spheres circle around her like a folkdance.

But even as they rotated, Shinjou followed them. An acceleration charm burst.

"Speed up!"

She ran to the side while looking up and letting the flowers of gunfire blossom.

She did not let any of the approaching light escape. If she missed any of that lightning, she would be destroyed.

And she had a single way of destroying it.

…Rapid fire!

Rapid fire was her only option now.

The tapping sound of the A button had stabilized. The button had passed an endurance test of more than one hundred thousand presses, so it was not going to be destroyed as it swept aside such a puny number of attacks.

So with more-than-wholehearted focus, Shinjou entered a realm void of hesitation and cessation and she produced the song of continuous fire.

This was a world of battle. It was the last level of the many worlds.

"…!"

Higher. She would lift herself higher. She would lift herself to the top of this world's high score list.

"Right!"

Shinjou held Ex-St at the ready as she spun around.

She destroyed more and more as she fired through each and every lightning sphere from one end to the other.

Her shots pierced through every last one and they exploded.

She ran through that chain of explosive light and toward Noah.

Noah looked up in surprise.

"!?"

The chain of lightning struck her.

It crashed into her and sent her flying.

The wings on her back shattered, she bent backwards, and she trembled.

"————!!"

But Noah continued fighting.

She forcibly swept aside the lightning with her gravitational control, let it surround her, and…

“This is not over yet!! Over!”

She produced a shimmering of heat directly above herself.

It was a size bigger than the balls of lightning and a vertical line of them appeared on either side.

“Altogether, the Leviathan’s spare energy reaches 256! …Here I go!!”

She swung both arms toward Shinjou.

At the same time, the shimmering spheres audibly vanished.

It sounded like splitting stone and something more came from Noah’s hands.

“This is the same as the convergence of the Leviathan’s main cannon!”

The distorting power wrapped in lightning was fired toward Shinjou.

“Over!!”

The twelve meter wide attack was equal to the dragon cannon blast that had annihilated Japanese UCAT.

Shinjou was faced with that great power, but…

“…!!”

She raised Ex-St again, dug her feet into the ground, and…

“Bomber!!”

A great white light almost seemed to explode from the barrel.

“Goooo!!”

The straight white light intercepted the distorting power.

She had built up plenty of energy during the earlier rapid fire. And…

“Wanambi!”

She saw Wanambi wrap around Ex-St.

The energy released from the cooled cannon surpassed the word “momentum” as it simply fired its white light.

But…

“Do you think a human can stand up to a dragon, Shinjou Sadagiri!? Over.”

Sure enough, the trembling white light was pushed back by the distorting power.

The ammunition belts of distortion above Noah’s shoulders were rapidly consumed.

And that pushed back on Shinjou’s white light all the more.

A reaction sphere appeared where the light collided and split.

The white light and the black distortion mixed together and formed a massive spherical field of energy.

That field grew to five meters in an instant and continued to grow toward Shinjou.

And it did not end there.

Pure-white forms arrived from either side of the field.

One was a mechanical dragon and the other was a god of war. They were Seraph No. 0 and Lords No. 0.

Shinjou gasped when she saw them to the left and right.

“What!? No fair making this a mid-boss rush!!”

“But they are a part of me. Seraph No. 0 and Lords No. 0 are both my power,” said Noah. “Over.”

The mechanical dragon and god of war aimed their main cannon or sword toward Shinjou. Wanambi could transform heat into himself, but he was busy cooling Ex-St. If Wanambi moved away, Noah would immediately push in on Shinjou.

But the situation changed.

The pure-white god of war and mechanical dragon were blown away.

“!?”

The pure-white mechanical dragon was hit by a red, white, and blue mechanical dragon colliding with its side.

The pure-white god of war was hit by a white god of war falling from the heavens.

Who were they? Mikoku shouted their names as she fought Sayama.

“Alex…and Tatsumi!?”

“That’s right.”

The answer came from the figure standing on Typhon’s shoulder while Lords No. 0 righted itself in midair.

It was Tatsumi.

She lightly clenched her trembling hands and her face was pale, but she still faced her enemy.

“No interference, okay?”

Shinjou nodded.

While continuing to fire white light from Ex-St and while trembling, Shinjou shouted toward Noah.

“I am your only opponent!”

“Then let us end this. Over.”

Noah rearranged the distorting ammunition belts reaching up toward the heavens.

She arranged them into four stacks.

“Double the power. Over.”

With the distorting cannon doubled, Shinjou was pushed back by the reverse flow reaching her through Ex-St.

The reaction sphere, the energy, the pressure, and everything else were pushing her way.

“…!”

●

Sayama and Mikoku carried out a rapid swordfight within the light.

This was their third clash.

Neither of them was sure if they should call the score one-to-one.

The first time, Mikoku had tried for a draw, but Shino had gotten in the way.

The second time, Sayama had won the battle, but Mikoku had kept the war going.

Then what would happen this third time?

Mikoku no longer saw a draw as an option.

She would either win or lose.

And she threw her sword forward to receive that answer.

Distorting power was racing through the air.

A white cannon blast joined it.

Noah and Shinjou were fighting.

No, everyone was fighting.

The entire world was trying to stop what she wanted.

…Do they not want this?

Mikoku wondered about that.

To bring the entire world back to life was to renew the world.

The world would briefly disappear.

“Do you not want that? But what about it do you not like?”

She threw her sword forward and felt Tokyo’s illumination below.

“Do you not like the idea of losing everything the world has inherited? Or do you not like that the world will disappear and you too will disappear?”

If it was the latter…

“You are only worried about yourself.”

The words she sent out with her sword strikes were answered with a voice and another sword.

“Then…I have one thing to ask you.”

Sayama raised his eyebrows as he threw his water blade toward her.

“You claim you never want to feel sad again. So aren’t you too only worried about yourself?”

“What other option is there!?”

She launched her sword.

Her skill with the blade was greater.

“I think with emotion and you think with reason! You reach for your reason even as you ache, but that pain is the proof of your inconsistency!”

She chained her slashes together, crouched down as she moved forward, and viewed the surrounding situation.

Noah and Shinjou were fighting, but…

“Look! Shinjou is obviously being pushed back! Yes, Noah has no emotions. She truly is my opposite! But Shinjou is different. She is as inconsistent and contradictory as you.”

She deflected Sayama’s water sword upwards.

She stepped forward and stayed low.

“Contradictions makes anything possible!? No! It only leaves everything incomplete!!”

Her sword ripped at Sayama's body.

But that attack only tore a shallow gouge from his stomach to his chest.

His quick evasion came from his martial arts background.

Mikoku had not stepped in close enough because she had been facing him in the realm of sword fighting.

And as they showed off their strong points and weak points, the reaction sphere created from Noah and Shinjou's power whipped up the wind and created lightning overhead.

The flashes of white light illuminated them again and again as Mikoku pursued Sayama.

She continued forward as he back stepped away.

"If you asked me whether emotion or reason is more powerful, I would tell you either one can be! It comes down to which one has been mastered more thoroughly!!"

And…

"I am merely transforming this inconsistent world into one where our emotions can rest easy! What is wrong with that!?"

"Then let me say this!"

Sayama swung his blade, but it was not even worth blocking since his hips were not behind it.

However, he did stop her attack with it.

"I will make you cry!"

"So what!?"

Sayama responded to her questioning attack by swinging his body. He deflected her strike with a compact movement of the water blade.

"Let me tell you an old story! Once, a boy lost his parents and became hopelessly full of himself! The lecherous old man the boy was left with would always say the same thing whenever the boy did something: 'I will make you cry'!"

"What does that-…?"

"Do you still not understand!?" shouted Sayama. "Emotions can be dealt with so long as you cry!!"

"Is that your idea of reason!?"

Mikoku ran and slammed her blade against his. Their foreheads collided as they tried to push each other back and Sayama gave another shout.

"You are trying to run away before you have finished crying! You are trying to run away from this very world!"

"But Shino died!!" roared Mikoku as she stared Sayama in the eye. "Whether I try to run away or stay, Shino is still just as dead! She died!"

Mikoku used all of her strength to knock Sayama away.

She then crouched down and raised her sword on the left.

She prepared it like a baseball bat, but she leaned and ran forward as if to run into him herself.

She was using everything at her disposal to beat him down by force.

“Answer me if you can! This world is an inconsistent contradiction of both emotion and reason, but what does that accomplish!? All it brought was death! Isn’t that right!? And you…”

She knew she had to say this.

“You lost your parents, so you should already understand this!!”

For an instant, all movement vanished from Sayama’s body.

He was aching.

That is your flaw, thought Mikoku as she saw him stop save for a faint tremor.

He attempted to hold two incompatible things within himself and he was tormented by the harsh reaction.

He could not endure it, no matter how strong a front he put up.

So she sent out her sword.

She first knocked Sayama’s wooden sword up from below.

The blow hit.

With a solid sound, the wooden sword flew through the air, Sayama’s arms were shot upwards, and his body bent backwards.

Mikoku pulled back her weapon as if drawing in her body.

Her body had twisted from the left to the upper right, so she pulled it back to the lower left.

She would drop her blade across Sayama’s arching body.

Mikoku spoke as she saw Noah and Shinjou’s battle continuing in Noah’s favor.

“Farewell!”

●

“Sayama-kun!?”

Shinjou was briefly distracted by Sayama and Mikoku’s battle.

“Do you have time to look away? Over.”

Pushed by Noah’s words and the pressure of the reaction sphere, Shinjou’s feet slid back over the grass.

She was worried about this battle and about Sayama.

But…

…It’ll be okay!

She shouted the words to help convince herself.

“It’ll be okay!!”

Facing forward meant facing her enemy.

She spoke while holding her ground so she would not be blown away.

“Um!”

She watched the four ammunition belts being consumed above Noah’s shoulders.

“If you think that’s enough to win, then this will be easy!!”

Shinjou opened Ex-St’s console. Information on Ex-St’s current state

appeared in front of the transparent floating image that functioned as a sight.

It was badly overheated, but that was not what she was interested in.

“Bomber stock.”

She displayed the number of charged shots she had stored. A maximum of seventeen could be stored at one time.

“I currently have sixteen plus the one I’m firing right now.”

“——————”

Noah frowned slightly, but Shinjou did not care.

“How much fighting do you think I did on the way here? You two were just watching, but we ran, endured, and cried out so many times. So…so…”

She gave a shout.

“I, Shinjou Sadagiri, will now fire all of my bomber shots!!”

Such luxury, she thought. *I can’t believe I have the luxury of making an attack like this.*

In a quick succession of shots, she would use up everything she had built up.

…You don’t get to fire sixteen in a row very often.

So she prepared her finger and breathed in.

“I only have one chance at this!!”

She began.

She stepped forward as if pushing on the reaction sphere that was already ten meters across.

“Here goes!!”

She activated some acceleration charms and leaped forward.

Her attacks were energy. The greater the distance, the more they would be weakened, so she knew the most effective method.

“A point-blank rapid fire barrage!!”

She used her leap to push in on and shake the reaction sphere and to fly toward Noah.

She began her rapid-fire barrage at the same time.

Mikoku and Sayama’s battle was also approaching its conclusion.

Mikoku and Sayama.

Noah and Shinjou.

The two pairs synchronized their movements.

●

Mikoku realized Shinjou had flown up overhead.

Her target was Noah, not Mikoku.

But if Shinjou was moving so much…

“Noah!?”

She received no response.

No, something even more important than an answer occurred before her eyes.

Sayama moved in response to her sword.

“————!”

He suddenly swung his body as if tearing it away from her.

…He escaped the pain and moved!?

This had all happened in an instant. It was too soon for him to recover.

Mikoku had watched his mock battle with 2nd-Gear where Sayama had recovered from this pain from the past, but it had taken time, it had left him shaking, and it had been far from perfect.

But this had been much faster and he was not trembling in the slightest.

He jumped up, fell back, and dodged her dropping blade.

“You have got to be kidding me!!”

●

Shinjou saw Sayama use his own will to shatter the pain from the past.

Unlike during the battle with 2nd-Gear, he knew the meaning the past.

He knew his feelings would never reach the past and he knew the many things that would never return. That was the source of his pain and it had grown even deeper than before, but at the same time…

…You understand it now, don’t you?

“After learning so much, you understand what our parents were thinking,” shouted Shinjou as she fired. “It might make you sad, but you’re glad you understand what exactly it was we lost, aren’t you!?”

Sayama eloquently replied with his movements.

As Shinjou fired, he gave a shout and moved forward.

“Precisely, Shinjou-kun!!”

●

Mikoku took a defensive stance as Sayama approached.

He brought his right knee forward and spread his arms back like wings as he charged in toward her.

“Toda Mikoku! The new world you desire only exists in the past!”

“I will regain what was lost! Of course it exists there!”

“Then are you going to give up on yourself!?”

She heard his voice as he raced forward.

“What was it you inherited from the others? Wasn’t it a life in this world!?”

She held her sword low and shouted her true thoughts back at him.

“Are you trying to say this world is a richer one than the eleven that were lost!?”

“Of course!! After all, this world was made by those of us who have inherited everything that came before, so it must have more than the eleven worlds that led the way!”

Sayama quickly filled the gap between them.

“To inherit something is not just to gain the past. It also gives you the right to continue on ahead! The *present* exists as a contradictory combination of the

future and the *past*, Toda Mikoku! Thus, we are attempting to move forward, but you are not even inheriting the past. You are giving up on the present to become the past!!”

“But that is what our emotions want!”

Mikoku threw herself forward as she shouted back at him and she swung a quick sword strike from below.

“If desiring that contradiction leads to pain, then it is safer to immerse yourself in the unchanging past!”

“Then let me say this!”

Sayama leaned forward as he approached.

“Earlier, you mocked my simultaneous suppression and desire for this pain as inconsistent, didn’t you!? But let me say this: emotion and reason can coexist! After all…”

Sayama’s left leg suddenly kicked her rising blade aside.

“Wha-!?”

The action was only possible given his great speed.

And when he kicked his right leg forward, Mikoku knew it would hit her. She had no time to dodge it, but she did hear his voice.

“I ask you!”

His kick landed.

Mikoku bent backward and was knocked from her feet, but her sword did not leave her right hand.

Her body was shaking from the impact. Her consciousness had almost left her and she could not breathe.

But the philosopher’s stone in her chest told her that she could continue to fight.

She had a certain power.

That high-speed regeneration instantly adjusted her body.

Pain filled her. It felt like her entire body was being squeezed.

But that was precisely what she had inherited.

…This is my power!

As long as she had this, she could continue to fight.

…Yes.

“I cannot lose!”

That was when Sayama attacked again and spoke the same words as before.

“I ask you!!”

On a count of 1 2 3, he attacked from the left.

“It is both emotion and reason.”

He reversed his body to make a right smash.

“Yet it is neither.”

He was fast.

“It produces both resignation and hope.”

A sequence of heavy blows reached her.

“It can never end, yet it can be ended.”

Her body floated upwards, but an instantaneous adjustment allowed her to hear his voice.

“It is a human virtue, yet it can also be called a mistake.”

An attack from the right rang through her body.

“It is contradictory, yet it is also perfectly logical.”

She bent backwards.

“It is everything and yet it is the one thing at the base of both emotion and reason.”

He spun his body to build speed for a right hook while also preparing his left fist down low.

“Do you know what it is!?”

Mikoku instantly realized the answer, but she was not to answer with words.

The answer would be shown by this battle’s outcome.

“If what you speak of truly exists, then prove it through the outcome here!!”

As if answering her cry, her body ached and adjusted itself.

She straightened her backwards-leaning body and swung the sword in her right hand.

“Not even your Georgius could break my power, remember!? In that case…”

She launched her attack toward Sayama who raised his left fist in front of her.

“My emotions are an unbreakable power!!”

She did it.

It was an excellent sword strike. The strike seemed to follow the sword’s own wishes. She felt like it was flying forward on its own and she was merely placing her hand alongside it.

If this did not slice through him, something was clearly wrong.

But then she saw it.

She saw the beginning of an answer overhead.

●

Shinjou moved through the air.

She had heard Sayama’s question while she shot her rapid fire blasts toward Noah.

She knew the answer to his question.

So she proved her answer.

In a single second, that bearer of the rapid fire blasts would settle this battle.

That was known as an instant kill.

“!!”

Pushed by the rapid fire, the reaction sphere crashed into Noah.

Noah endured it with a gravity barrier, but it suddenly surpassed her limits and slammed her onto the grass.

“————!!”

An explosion rose into the sky and the Leviathan shook.

“Sayama-kun!”

Shinjou took action to solidify her proof of Sayama’s answer.

She gave the answer to his question.

●

What Mikoku saw happened in an instant.

Before she could swing down her blade, a silver light flew forward from behind her.

It looked like a coin.

…*A chip?*

A hand caught it in front of her.

It was Sayama’s.

His left hand was raised to attack and his right hand caught the chip.

He then swapped out the chip for the one in his positive Georgius.

“The negative one!?”

Both Georgiuses had finished warming up due to the repeated strikes of Mukiti’s wooden sword and Shinjou’s cannon blasts. By swapping out the chips, he had filled Georgius with the conflicting power.

“The positive in the negative and the negative in the positive. This is Georgius’s true form!!”

As soon as he completed his shout, Georgius emitted a powerful light. It was a black and white light.

“!?”

The two powers flew with tremendous speed.

And they slipped below her sword.

“I will give you the answer! What is it that is made up of emotion and reason, that produces all things, and that allows even contradictions? It is something everyone has.”

Sayama and Shinjou’s voices rang out in unison to give the answer.

“It is the power of one’s will!!”

It reached her.

“Remember this! Both emotion and reason are but a single part of a thinking mind!”

The counterattack exploded in Mikoku’s chest.

●

Mikoku had been hit by one half of Georgius.

Because it was incomplete, it brought forth a certain result.

On the skin below Mikoku’s shredded collar, the contradictory fist shattered her philosopher’s stone.

Instead of just splitting, it shattered into a spray.

She bent back from the impact, and…

“Ah…”

The shattered stone loosened its form and, in a desperate attempt to survive, fused with another color hanging from Mikoku's neck.

It fused with the blue philosopher's stone Shino had left behind. The blue light combined, formed a ball, and became one.

Afterwards, Mikoku was unable to stop the impact that had struck her body.

"…!!"

She was slammed into the ground.

●

Shinjou saw the conclusion.

She breathed a sigh of relief while pressing the chipless Georgius to her chest.

In front of her, Sayama was gasping for breath and grabbing Mikoku's arm.

"Come. You have inherited more of the past than anyone else. …If you can see nothing but the past, then we will help you to not give up on yourself and to create a new world here."

Shinjou listened to what Sayama told his other self.

"After inheriting so much of the past, I am sure you will find somewhere where you can get serious."

Shinjou smiled bitterly when he mentioned getting serious.

So she ran over to him and elbowed him in the side.

"You have to search for that too, don't you?"

He smiled bitterly.

"I saw some of the answer during this battle. …I saw a hint in the idea of creating a new world here."

"Eh?"

Shinjou looked surprised, but Sayama raised a finger in front of his nose to ask her to keep it a secret.

She frantically nodded and he whispered in her ear.

"It is a lot of fun to think about it what kind of world I would find fun. I do not know what that would be, but I get the feeling it will be both difficult and fun to create."

Shinjou felt a look of joy fill her face, so she helped Sayama get Mikoku back to her feet.

"If you do decide to do something, will you invite me first of all?"

"Of course. I will need you to write about it."

She nodded and looked around. The entire area was silent.

According to the bell tower's clock, it was 10:29 and that reminded Shinjou of something.

"We won."

She picked up Mukiti's wooden sword from the ground, but…

"No. We have not truly won yet, Shinjou-kun."

Sayama suddenly spoke to her.

She turned toward his low but sharp voice and realized he was not looking her way.

He was looking one thing in particular. A doll, Noah, was standing on the grass.

She was injured and broken. Her hands were clasped in front of her waist and her head was somewhat lowered.

She showed no intention to attack.

But Sayama spoke.

“Noah-kun, this is not over yet, is it?”

“Eh?”

As soon as Shinjou expressed her surprise, Noah lowered her head a little and spoke.

“Testament.”

That word was a confirmation, but Shinjou did not understand what she meant.

…W-wait a second!

“What do you mean it isn’t over yet!? Isn’t the battle over!? We completed the seal!”

The creation of the positive concepts inside the Leviathan would have been stopped.

What more could they fight over?

It happened a moment later.

“!?”

Shinjou felt a pulse.

It was not her own. The pulse shook this space itself.

This pulsating tremor of the very world shook the heavens and earth equally.

She looked up in surprise and found Noah looking her way.

“Do you understand? The Leviathan still holds the activating negative concepts. Over.”

Noah closed her eyes and spoke expressionlessly.

“Find a solution! If you do not…!”

The pulse sounded especially loudly.

“This world will fall to the negative side just as Top-Gear did! Over.”

With those words, Shinjou and Sayama were blasted into empty space.

She knew why. Noah had forced them away to safety as the Leviathan evolved to yet another combat form.

By the time she caught on, it was too late.

She was already in the sky. As it grew more distant overhead, the Leviathan began to spread out its curled up body.

Pieces of armor measuring several hundred meters were stretching out and remaking the great dragon’s body.

…I can’t believe this.

Just as Sayama had said, there was more to that great dragon.

…What's going to happen!?

She heard Noah's weak voice.

"The Leviathan will now imprison the uncontrollable negative concepts…"

Shinjou never heard the automaton say "over".

That meant Noah had lost control of the Leviathan.

The positive concepts had been meant to oppose the negative concepts, so stopping their creation had allowed the negative concepts to rapidly eat into Noah's interior.

"It's lost control!?"

Shinjou saw the color white rising through the sky.

It was wings.

The angels fighting in the sky and on the surface had been summoned back to their home.

The color white returned to heaven while paying them no heed.

They would receive physical adjustments from the Leviathan, master of the negative concepts.

Shinjou had a thought as she and Sayama fell toward the others below: *The world has decided what it intends to do.*

"But the world itself will still be judged."

Shinjou breathed in and shouted toward the white light gathering in the heavens.

"We're about to judge whether this world can remain or not!"

●

It was 10:30 PM.

Once the negative concepts inside the Leviathan realized that the positive concepts binding them would not grow any further, they rapidly began multiplying like living creatures.

They took control of their host, the Leviathan, and they used the Leviathan's thought circuits to gain crude thoughts of their own.

This created a will. Its duty as the negative was to desire the annihilation of anything positive.

A contradiction allowance concept was restraining it, but once its activation surpassed that, the world would pass its critical point and be annihilated.

And the Leviathan knew two things: it was trapped in a small space and there were those who would oppose it.

It also lacked the power it need for a complete activation.

So the Leviathan gave its children new orders and gathered them inside.

That heavenly host was immersed in negative concepts.

To fight back, UCAT prioritized maintaining the seal while also settling on a certain plan. This plan would allow them to fully strike back against these ten powerful negative concepts.

"Operation Leviathan Release."

That was the plan’s name.

Chapter 25

“Twist of the World”

The world seen from the hilltop
The world seen from the city
The world seen from the depths of the night
I want to take care of them all

●

The Leviathan stopped moving in the sky above Shinjuku Station.

The sounds of changing and evolving armor occasionally descended from those cloudy heavens, but the Leviathan was otherwise entirely still.

A pair of eyes looked up at it from the center of the earth seal barrier in front of the station.

“It is showing no sign of moving anytime soon. It only needs to wait for the negative concepts inside to fully activate, so it must see no reason to waste its forces.”

Sayama stood in the center of that earth circle that had opened a meter from the ground.

Several other figures surrounded him in the clearing before the station’s east entrance.

Some were people, some were not, some were machines, and some were dragons.

The nearest of them all, Shinjou, asked him a question.

“What are we going to do, Sayama-kun?”

“Well.” He nodded. “The standard course of action before the final battle is for the boy and girl to sneak off and do indecent things. And all on the pretext of ‘this might be our last chance’. Of course, I think the best possible way to transfer responsibility for such inappropriate acts would be-… What is it, Shinjou-kun? Why are you activating Wanambi with a smile? Are you cold? Oh, we cannot have that! We must warm each other up this very moment!”

“Don’t transfer responsibility to the cold!! Besides, we already did that cliché!”

While Shinjou pulled on Sayama’s tie and shook him, Heo blushed a little and turned toward Harakawa.

“H-Harakawa, u-um, don’t take this the wrong way, but it’s true this might be our last chance…”

Harakawa expressionlessly placed a hand on her head.

“Do you want to eat some pudding?”

“Wh-why are you treating me like a child!?”

“You were giving that pudding a pretty longing look back in the supermarket.”

“I-I w-was n-n-n-not!”

“It was the one with a cow wearing a jersey on the package. Was it called Jersey Milk Cream & Pudding?”

Heo hung her head in defeat.

“If we make it back alive, I want that pun pudding as a reward.”

“If that’s what you want. But eat it all yourself. It’ll probably make you grow. Widthwise.”

“Wh-why can’t you just be honest for once!?” she shouted with her fists clenched. “Just the night before last, you dragged me outside without any

clothes on, but you only watched without doing anything! I-it was just too much and I really thought I was going to fall! And then while we got down to business and I was gasping for breath, saying I couldn't keep going, you told me I could, told me to 'get set', and then kept riding me. I didn't think I could get any higher than that!"

She placed her hands on her cheeks and waved her head left and right.

"Harakawa! You're the one that's always going inside me and saying things like 'is it here?' or 'that should do it'!"

"At least explain what you're talking about first!!"

Harakawa saw the others glaring at him and Odor being held back by Roger and Diana.

"Calm down, Heo Thunderson. Talking about the happy things too much will raise a death flag for you."

"Wh-what's wrong with just talking?"

"This isn't reality. It's a space filled with insanity. There's a decent possibility of those flags actually working."

As soon as he said that, the crowd split to let two people through.

One was a boy and the other was a girl clinging to his neck from behind.

"I've got great news, everyone! Sibyl-san still had a copy of Mikage-san's medical exam results and it looks like she really has become human."

"Nn. Ryuuji-kun, we were too busy yesterday, but let's take a bath together when we get back."

"Of course! Oh, I can't wait."

Heo paled at their conversation.

"He's raising all sorts of dangerous flags, isn't he?"

"Calm down, Heo. He's always like that, so he's built up an immunity to flags. Your standard flag won't be enough to kill him."

"Wh-what kind of ominous things are you two talking about!?"

They all took their turn ignoring Hiba.

On the opposite end from him, Kazami and Izumo walked up. They held their weapons and a 4th-Gear creature to remove their exhaustion.

"Oh, things sure are lively over here. How are your preparations going?"

"And do you have anything to eat? I'm kind of starving over here."

"Starving?" asked one creature. "Going to die?"

"Yeah, it sure feels like it after running so much. I could use some water too."

The two of them found a rest table and started chowing down on the food laid out there.

The others had been too nervous to touch the food, but those two had no such reservations.

"The rest of you should eat too. Even if we lose, would you rather lose with your stomach full or while you're starving? The same goes for winning. And our odds of victory seem better if we've eaten, don't they?"

The others exchanged a glance and slowly started eating too.

Kazami and Izumo's pace was still faster, though.

As Shinjou watched them from behind, she tugged on Sayama's sleeve.

"They really are carnivorous beasts, aren't they?"

"You say something, Shinjou?"

"N-no, nothing."

Shinjou and everyone else averted their gaze.

Wanambi and the Messengers even moved away as they controlled some nearby machines.

"Carnivorous" "Strange" "Empty-headed" "Dilemma"

But Kazami and Izumo were not the only ones being avoided. No one approached the figures in black armored uniforms protected by a mechanical dragon and god of war.

A simple bed had been prepared in the center and the members of the Army had wrapped a girl in a blanket and placed her there.

Mikoku slept at the center of that ring of people. She almost seemed a prisoner of her body's weariness.

Hajji nodded toward her and then faced forward, where Tatsumi stood.

Looking somewhat pale, Tatsumi placed her trembling hands in her coat pockets.

When she turned around, she found the UCAT members and Sayama.

"We will help you fight. And we have one thing to ask."

"If it is about Mikoku-kun, then we will honor what I announced before the battle," replied Sayama. "I believe that letting her live will provide a memorial service for all of the lost worlds. She attempted to revive all that was destroyed and yet she failed. We must let this be a world in which she wants to keep living and to create something. If we punished her and did not allow that, we would be the ones in the wrong."

"Isn't that…going too easy on her?"

Sayama shrugged at Tatsumi's question.

"It is not. After all, her life will not be an easy one."

For only a brief moment, his eyes turned to the girl in the blanket.

"The world knows nothing of the Concept War or of today. And in that world, she will always remember the lives she herself took. Also…"

He looked across the others.

"She will live in constant fear that someone with a grudge will attack her and that might very well happen. But if she can gain allies and manage to smile and act on her own even a little, then I would call that a victory for us all."

"I see."

Tatsumi nodded and then Sayama asked her something.

"What happened to the mechanical dragon and god of war that tried to attack us during the battle on top of the Leviathan?"

"They quickly lost control and fell," said Alex. "That was most likely due to Noah losing control of the Leviathan."

“To be honest, it really saved us,” said Tatsumi. “The No. 0 of the Seraph and Lords models are on the same level as Alex or Typhon. But…”

She looked up into the sky.

The Leviathan was there and a white ring had formed around it.

“If the Leviathan desires the greatest possible combat power, all of the gods of war and mechanical dragons stored inside will be installed with Noah’s knowledge. All of the gods of war and mechanical dragons will probably be on Typhon or Alex’s level next time. Wouldn’t it be best to start fighting right away?”

She then looked down to Georgius on Sayama’s hands.

“Besides, one half of Georgius there destroyed Mikoku’s philosopher’s stone, right? Maybe a strike from both hands would be enough to destroy the Leviathan’s negative concepts.”

“You want to me attack something that big with my fists?”

Everyone turned toward him when they heard that.

He raised both Georgiuses with a bitter smile and Shinjou asked him a question with her eyebrows lowered.

“C-can you not do it? Is it too big?”

“Georgius is a striking weapon, Shinjou-kun. Normally, it would simply be impossible.”

“Th-then…” began Shinjou.

“But there is one method that is not exactly normal.”

●

Shinjou listened to Sayama’s serious words.

“Yes, are you listening, Shinjou-kun? There is one method.”

Everyone waited in silence for him to continue.

But Shinjou’s loud voice shattered that silence.

“W-wait!”

She was blushing and she covered her chest and crotch.

“N-no asking for something in exchange for telling me!”

Dumbfounded, Sayama turned toward her.

He seemed to be asking what she was talking about.

…Eh?

A few seconds later, he slowly nodded.

“That is a great idea!!”

“Waaah!! Why did I say that!?”

“C-calm down, Shinjou-kun. Um, okay. Sorry, everyone, but Shinjou-kun and I will be leaving for a bit. Yes, yes. You can kill some eating the food over there.”

“W-wah! W-wait! Don’t pick me up! Don’t!”

“Ha ha ha. You do not want me to hold you? Then how about a backwards piggy back ride? Oh, dear. Now I cannot see.”

Ex-St was nearby, so Shinjou grabbed it and slammed it down on his head.

…You idiot!

She expected a groan of pain or surprise after the dull impact, but…

"Heh."

An awkward sound escaped his throat and he collapsed to the side.

Shinjou caught her breath next to him.

"Honestly, you really need to think about the overall situation before doing things like that."

She then watched for five seconds as Sayama remained entirely motionless.

"Oh, no! Wh-what have I done!?"

The others gave their comments while she frantically tried to shake him awake.

"Harakawa, is it just me or does Shinjou need to think about the overall situation too?"

"That's because the Sayama virus has infected the morality part of her brain. There's no saving her now."

"D-don't scare me like that!! I need to wake Sayama-kun up!"

"Then wake him."

That comment came from Kazami who turned around with a spoon in her mouth. She started ripping apart a large shrimp at the table and she pointed toward Sayama with her chin.

Shinjou looked over and realized Sayama had lifted his head a bit while still lying on the ground.

"Sayama-kun, what is that pose supposed to be?"

"You cannot tell? I wish to lie in your lap, Shinjou-kun."

"Oh?" She nodded. "W-well, it's a little embarrassing, so no turning around, okay?"

She stuck Ex-St under his head.

Sayama immediately started stroking his hands across Ex-St's surface.

"Heh heh. Shinjou-kun, you must have been running too much. Your legs are a little hard today."

"N-not too much touching okay? That's pretty sensitive."

"There is no way I could resist, Shinjou-kun. Ohh, such wonderful curves. And here…hm? I-I found some kind of lewd hole!"

"Ah, d-don't touch that hole! I-it's going to come out! The hot blast is going to come out!"

"Then is this small protrusion your love button, Shinjou-kun!?"

Everyone ducked.

"Let us see that reaction!"

As soon as Sayama pressed the button, Ex-St fired and everyone along the line of fire fled.

The recoil launched Ex-St backwards and it crashed into Izumo as he ate some sushi.

Kazami calmly moved her plate of gratin out of the way while Izumo was sent

flipping over the table. He soon popped back up with a plate on his head.

"Y-you idiot! M-my precious tuna is flying through the sky!"

Shinjou averted her gaze and Sayama spun around on the ground like a break dancer after his pillow launched itself out from under him.

Everyone gave him a worried look and Shinjou waited for the perfect timing.

…This really is no time to be doing this.

Her casual kick hit his head, causing him to roll forward, but he sat up afterwards.

He swayed unsteadily while sitting crosslegged on the ground, so Shinjou sighed and sat down too.

"Anyway, Sayama-kun, can we get back on topic?"

"Are you going to ignore everything you did to me?"

"That's right. …Or do you want me to do it more?"

"Ha ha ha. That is the same thing you said last night, Shinjou-kun."

"Waaaahh!!"

For some reason, the others gave her kind looks, but she waved her hands at them.

"Don't listen to him! Don't listen! He's a crazy person!"

"Um…Shinjou-san?"

She turned toward Hiba, thanking him for the interruption.

"Wh-what is it!? I hope it's something fun."

"Well, maybe it's just me, but I think you're actively making all of this more complicated than it has to be."

She thought about that for a moment and finally hung her head.

"I just got a lecture from Ryuuji-kun of all people…"

"That's the depressing part!?"

Sayama nodded next to her, steadied himself, and looked across the others.

"Calm down, everyone. You people really do not make it easy to hold a conversation in peace."

"I don't want to hear that from you!!"

He ignored their shouts and raised his left hand.

"Sibyl-kun."

"Coming!"

For some reason, it was Ooki who pushed through the crowd.

Shinjou frowned and saw Sayama look at the woman.

"Ha ha ha. That is quite the new look, Sibyl-kun. …Why are you here, defective teacher?"

"That's just mean! S-Sibyl-san gave me her report."

Ooki sighed and looked down at said report.

"O-okay… With the Le-Levi-Leviathan? Overhead, the surrounding a-aut-automa-…"

"Someone help this illiterate."

"Testament." #8 peered at the report from the side. "With the Leviathan

overhead, the surrounding automatons have arranged their conceptual defenses in a ring. As things are, even approaching the Leviathan would be impossible."

"Wow, #8-san, you're a really good reader."

Ooki sounded utterly impressed and #8 gave a shallow nod.

"This is one of a maid's jobs."

"Wow, maids sure are amazing."

Everyone looked down toward the ground until a new voice asked a question. It was Boldman, leader of the standard division unit, and he looked back down at his gun as he did.

"What are we going to do?"

"Are you worried, Boldman-kun? Worry too much and your hair will fall-… Oh, I-I suppose nothing will ever grow on that barren land again. My apologies. …It is cold this time of year, so be careful."

After Sayama's comment, Shinjou smiled and lightly tapped him on the shoulder.

"You keep getting off topic!"

"Now that you mention it…"

She hung her head again, but he breathed in and spoke without warning.

"There is a way to stop the negative concepts and a way to get my fists to the Leviathan."

"…Eh?"

Shinjou quickly looked up and saw his eyes raised in a smile.

He then revealed how they could win.

"We will release the concepts."

●

It was 11:23 PM.

With thirty-seven minutes until the negative concepts fully activated, the Leviathan noticed movement down below.

The Leviathan determined this was a futile attempt.

It was protected by a giant defense field made by the angels and the surrounding sealing walls would be broken in another thirty-seven minutes.

The negative concepts would devour everything and the world would be remade as a world with nothing that could be lost.

That was a wonderful thing.

The Leviathan had something that was not quite a mind and it was filled with two missions.

The first was to create a new world and the second was not to lose anything.

It would fulfill those missions. It would fulfill them in the most perfect form.

With that in mind, the Leviathan decided to let the remaining time pass by.

But then something arrived.

It was a cannon blast.

A white line shot straight up from the circular seal directly below.

The light pierced the sky without losing much – if any – energy and it sprayed against the bottom of the defense field.

It could not breach the field, but a few of the automatons maintaining the field were fried.

And as if to double check that effect…

"_____"

Another blast arrived. Except this one was not alone. Dozens if not hundreds came with it. They were all deflected, but they produced a great noise and shook the wind.

And it did not stop.

It was a trivial number of the whole, but fried automatons fell from the sky.

I see, thought the Leviathan. *Such an unpleasant noise.*

There was just one sound the Leviathan liked.

It knew that fact, but it did not remember what that sound was.

Some small vestiges of the sound remained inside it and all other sounds were designated "unpleasant".

And so the Leviathan let its power spill forth.

The dolls, giants, and dragons contained inside it had been modified in a very short period of time.

The remnants of the incomplete positive concepts had been shifted to the negative side by the negative concepts and that power had been linked to this new army. It was a negative army.

That army was black.

The pitch black force passed through the white halo and dropped down, down, down.

But the Leviathan also saw something flying upwards and weaving back and forth to avoid the falling black army.

It was a mist that rose even higher than the Leviathan.

That mist flying alongside the seal in the heavens contained a boy with a flight philosopher's stone hanging from his neck.

He stood high in the sky with a great dragon of mist protecting him.

The Leviathan wondered what he could hope to accomplish.

The Leviathan also had another question.

Wasn't the seal in the sky Wanambi's and the one below Mukiti's?

That was when more light appeared.

The powerful light came from directly below and the surrounding eight directions.

"Begin releasing the Concept Cores!!"

A voice reverberated from the sky above.

"We will now break down the negative concepts by releasing the positive concepts!!"

●

Sayama looked down below with Baku on his head.

A giant dragon lived in the sky above Tokyo.

It was the Leviathan.

It was surrounded and protected by a great halo and light surrounded it in eight directions.

Those eight lights came from the release of the Concept Cores.

But their positions had changed.

“Reverse positions!!”

They were all positioned 180 degrees from their original position.

Region 1: North. Leader is Kazami.

Region 2: Northeast. Leader is Brunhild.

Region 3: East. Leader is Izumo.

Region 4: Southeast. Leader is Abram.

Region 5: South. Leader is Hiba.

Region 6: Southwest. Leader is Kashima.

Region 7: West. Leader is Heo.

Region 8: Northwest. Leader is Chao Yu.

Region 9: Heaven. Leader is Sayama.

Region 10: Earth. Leader is Shinjou.

They had a single reason for these reversed positions.

“The dragons will return to their origins! Therefore, if we release the concepts and make the declaration…”

Sayama swung his arm and willed his voice to reach them all.

“The dragons will race to their origins and destroy the negative concepts contained within the Leviathan at the center! That will release both the positive and negative concepts!!” he shouted. “Our estimates say it will take ten minutes to fully deploy the Concept Cores! Bear with it until then, everyone!! This will be…”

His voice rang through the heavens.

“This will be the Leviathan Road’s final battle!!”

Chapter 26

“The Pace Ahead”

Bless your load
Bless your song
Bless your blessing

●

The battle to defend their positions for ten minutes began directly below the Leviathan.

A black force flew down toward a forest of anti-air fire coming from Shinjou and the other gunners.

The angels with the vacant minds of dolls did not fear the cannon fire.

Even if they were hit or destroyed, the concept release would be stopped as long as they managed to crush those below.

So on the Leviathan's instructions, the black army cascaded downward.

But something happened once they arrived above Shinjuku Station.

"!?"

At only fifty meters above the earth seal, they collided with a wall.

It was an invisible wall.

"UCAT automatons! Use your full power!!"

On #8's command, a circle of maids raised their arms in front of the station.

They were all heavily equipped with philosopher's stone fuel tanks and radiator fins on their shoulders and backs.

They almost seemed to have several wings.

"Blow them away!!" ordered #8.

Heat shimmered behind them all, but they crouched down and…

"Testament!!"

A gravity lens created a defense barrier above them and they swung it like a tennis racket to perform a smash.

The sound of attack rang out.

With a bursting sound from the basin below, the black cascade scattered explosions and fragments through the sky.

The automatons were already preparing to form a second lens defense, but…

"————!!"

A new explosion shook the sky above.

Something was firing down on them.

The enemy attack tore through hundreds of their own on the way down.

The new black army cleared a path by splitting their own forces with gun and cannon fire.

They were fast and the gravity lens would not be up in time, but…

"Covering fire!!"

This cannon fire came from every direction.

The high-speed gunners on the vanguard of all eight armies had fired.

To #8 and the others, it looked like light was binding together the sky above.

The attacks from eight directions wore down the front of the descending black army, shrinking their numbers and slowing them. Even more fragments were created on the leading edge of that cascade.

It was working, but…

“Are we still not going to make it!?”

#8 calculated that they needed about another thirty seconds to open the defense lens.

And if the enemy pushed their way in before that…

“Protect Shinjou-sama even if nothing else!”

The others expressed their agreement with her shared thought.

“I have determined that is known as loyalty!!”

At the same time, a new figure appeared at the center of their group.

An old man in a lab coat had rushed over while they were focused on the sky.

“#-#8-kun! Are we in trouble here!? I-is poor old Kazuo here going to die!?”

“Testament. I do not mind in the slightest if you are the only one to die.”

“That’s just mean! And after I brought a secret weapon with me too!”

Ooshiro pulled ropes from his pockets and let them dangle from his hands.

Several silver squares hung from the thin ropes.

“These are a new type of localized bomb! With this many, it should be a real sight to see, don’t you think!?”

“Testament. Referring to your filthiness in a quantified manner such as ‘this many’ is certainly a revolutionary idea, Ooshiro-sama. So what are you going to do with those?”

“Oh, well, I was thinking you could throw them into the midst of the enemy with your gravity lens.”

“I see.” #8 nodded. “But if we used the lens for that, we would be left completely defenseless.”

“O-oh, um…”

Ooshiro was caught off guard by that and #8 tapped his shoulder.

“Ooshiro-sama, please turn around for a moment.”

“Hm? Why? Do I have something on my back?”

#8 used a permanent marker to write a single word on the back of his lab coat: rocket.

She then looked around with an impatient look on her face.

“Does anyone have a light!? Anyone at all!?”

“Nwaaaah!!”

Ooshiro cried out as some South African UCAT members wearing white triangular masks rushed forward and fired their flamethrowers toward his feet.

“Let your youth blast off!!”

A moment later, Ooshiro Kazuo really did blast off.

●

A giant explosion suddenly appeared in the center of the black army descending below the Leviathan.

The giant pink blast covered a vertical area of three kilometers and was shaped like a heart.

Thousands of angel automatons, gods of war, and mechanical dragons were

swallowed up and vanished despite their attempts to escape.

“————!!”

The trailing notes of the explosion sounded oddly FM synthesized.

But all of the UCAT members reacted to the pink pulse phenomenon lingering in the air.

“That’s UCAT Director Ooshiro!”

“Oh! Is that what you call Kleshas!?”

“ !?”

After a few multilingual comments, they all joined together.

“That UCAT director just took all the world’s misdirection with him!!”

Waves of cheers ran through the armies in all eight directions.

But they stopped after the fifth cheer.

The flow of black had started toward the eight surrounding directions in addition to directly below.

The Leviathan was now sending its main force in every direction.

●

The first minute began of the ten they had to defend.

The light of the Concept Core filled the sky of northeastern Region 2, where 1st-Gear defended.

It looked like a cloud, like a dragon, and somewhat like…

“Fafnir?” muttered Brunhild.

She stabbed Gram into the ground and raised her own weapon.

That weapon was the Requiem Sense.

The dragon made of light was also made of writing. The pale, glowing writing were packed in tightly and gently floated through the air as if to say it was 1st-Gear itself.

The distant sounds of cannon fire were growing closer.

The front line was being pushed back and this area would soon become a battlefield.

The Leviathan’s goal was to stop the Concept Cores from being activated.

Just as UCAT’s side had stopped the positive concepts from being created, the Leviathan would win if it could stop just one point.

Can we really do this? wondered Brunhild.

She frowned and gave a tense gasp when she saw the black light of the enemy beyond the road and beyond the trees of the park.

Suddenly, something tapped on her leg.

She looked down and saw a black cat looking up at her.

“Do you think we’re going to die?”

“You certainly like to reach extreme conclusions.”

“But…what happens if we do die?”

“Oh? You want to find out?”

“…What is that cold look for?”

“Well, I was just thinking I could help you on your way if you were interested.”

“C’mon, now. Ha ha ha. You don’t have to do anything like- ahee hee hee hee! Ahhh! It’s coming out!”

“Shut up,” said Brunhild as she stood back up.

The cat lying limp on the ground had distracted her, but she was still worried.

After all, 1st-Gear had been the lowest Gear during the Concept War and their enemy was the highest of Gears.

…*Can we do this?*

But just as she thought that, she saw something.

It was a castle. She saw an image of a castle filled with flames.

…*Eh?*

People wearing familiar clothing were evacuating the castle.

Also, someone stood by the wall of the castle’s main passageway.

“Gutrune?”

This is the past, realized Brunhild as she looked inside the shaking castle.

The Requiem Sense was not releasing its souls, so…

“Baku!?”

●

In the sky above, Sayama felt Baku happily raise his front paws on his head.

The creature was showing off the past. Probably in a way that corresponded to the world’s fighting below.

“7th-Gear’s concepts are filling this space, too.”

Baku devoured people’s pasts in the form of dreams.

And he had a further effect in this space so filled with concepts.

“By overlapping the wills of the past or of older battles, one gains divine protection when taking similar actions.”

Sayama pulled out his cellphone and made a call.

“Sibyl-kun, I would like to order an additional concept text. There is still time, isn’t there? Make it…yes, provide divine protection from the actions of your ancestors or predecessors.”

He smiled thinly down below.

“We shall be joined and assisted by the actions of the past sixty years…no, and even those before!!”

●

Brunhild saw Gutrune shouting something while hiding her body below a coat.

Her face was pale, but her voice held the dignity of a princess.

“Do not panic! We have a world to go to! That world…”

Brunhild listened.

“That world will surely accept us!!”

Brunhild clenched her teeth at that.

She stood in front of Gram and looked across the others.

“It’s time to protect that world!!”

She swung her scythe and raised her voice as the black army finally came into view.

“Our princess got us to this world and it’s our duty to make it a place where we can live in peace!”

So…

“It’s time we engraved our words into this world! The fight for our honor lies here!!”

●

The second minute began.

2nd-Gear defended the southwestern Region 6 and Kashima had just released Totsuka’s seal.

Totsuka revealed its contents as if the string had been untied. That Cowling Sword was made from pieces of metal bearing names, but its role was complete and the rain dragon was revealed from within.

The seal’s astronomical model of names expanded in the sky and the great dragon of wind and water ascended from within.

But Kashima was more focused on Totsuka than the windy rain dragon.

He could hear everyone fighting around him.

Tsukuyomi was firing the Heavenly Moon Bow and all of those with names of military gods were on the front line.

But a sudden song filled the battlefield. It was an off-tune anime song.

“Isssss that cruel girl herrrrrre to crush your shadowwwwwww!?”

Kashima had his back turned, but the voice approached regardless and powerfully skipped around him.

“She showwwwws no mercy to evillllll! Decapitation! Crucifixion! Throat thrust! She’ll defeat her enemy, their clan, and their retainers and put their heads on spiiiiiikes! Ohhhh, that’s right! That’s right! It’s Maaagical Girrrl Yun~!”

“It doesn’t really matter, but what part of that had the slightest thing to do with magic?”

“You idiot! Could you really not tell!? Getting that ‘~’ at the end right is really hard!”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

“Well, it’s what you should’ve asked about!! Got it!?”

Atsuta circled around in front of him and gathered his strength.

“~”

And…

“How about that!?”

“Oh, Natsu-san? Yes, I’m at work right now. Oh, well, something really pathetic just happened. Ha ha ha. Yes, I might be able to come home after a little more work. Yes, see you later. Mmmmwah.”

“Don’t get all lovey-dovey on the battlefield, you idiot!”

Kashima turned around.

“Idiot? Could you really not tell, Atsuta!? Getting that ‘mwah’ at the end right is really hard!”

Kashima held up his cellphone and pulled back his hips.

“Mwah.”

“And you call yourself a military god!?”

“It’s better than being a sword god that sings a cappella magical girl songs! Are you hearing things? Is that sword of yours picking up radio signals!? ‘Ahh, yes, this is Buddha. Someone please respond.’ ”

“Like hell that could happen, you idiot! Besides, I’m not hearing things!”

Atsuta ignored the looks of the others asking him to get back to work.

“I’m not just hearing those songs! They come from a secret place deep in my heart!”

“In other words, you’re picking up your own transmissions. That’s even worse.”

“You have to find fault with everything, don’t you!?”

Suddenly, the two of them moved back from each other.

A moment later, a pillar of light shot between them with a refreshing sound.

It was a moonlight arrow.

The one who had fired it, Tsukuyomi, kept the Heavenly Moon Bow aimed at the two men.

“Oops, my hand slipped. Sorry about that.”

“Y-you old hag! Are you picking a fight with me!?”

“Calm down, Atsuta. And Director Tsukuyomi, please wait until Atsuta moves away from me before firing on him.”

“Enough of that.”

Tsukuyomi looked around while drawing her bow.

“You can see the past around us.”

Kashima looked around them as well.

He could of course see it.

Baku was providing images of the past here in Tokyo.

The scene showed the people fleeing on the large runway below Susaou while Yamata was being sealed.

In the distance, the giant god of war wrapped its arms around the flame dragon and began absorbing the flames inside itself.

The fleeing people swept aside falling embers while they watched the seal in progress.

“Are we going to lose our world now?” asked someone in the past.

Someone else in the past answered.

It was a single engineer.

“No,” he said. “This means we managed to protect it all.”

Kashima listened to the voice as he looked down toward Totsuka in his hands.

“Director Tsukuyomi, if we win this battle…can I make a sword like this?”

“Submit a proposal. I’ll use that to decide.”

“Of course.”

Atsuta turned his back on Kashima.

“Do whatever you want, idiot. I’m on the way to the front line. I wouldn’t want to get you caught in the crossfire.”

He looked up just as black gods of war and mechanical dragons began to appear in the sky above.

The enemy’s main force was here.

They all gasped and clenched their teeth, but Atsuta raised his eyebrows in a slight smile.

“This looks like fun. I get to go on a dragon hunt!!”

He shook his body and raised his white sword.

“I can use it as many times as I want this time, so it’s time for slicing and dicing!”

●

The third minute began.

3rd-Gear defended the southern Region 5 and they began their fight with the enemy’s main force.

3rd-Gear had brought quite a few gods of war with them, so the southern region became a storm of shellfire and supersonic charges.

Susamikado stood at the very back, expanding the Concept Core from Keravnos, while the front line contained eight gods of war remotely piloted by Moira 2nd as well as the gods of war controlled by Gyes and Sibyl.

The in between area contained Miyako who stood with her arms crossed and Violet who was skilled at combat.

“Leave the ground battle against the angels to…u-um…us! Let’s all do our very best!”

Violet and the automatons under her command were joined by others.

“Fire both cannons!!”

Two groups created two rows of nine.

The Moirai formed gravity lens acceleration cannons to accurately fire on the flying forms.

Instead of plates, they used super-hard ceramic shells handmade by the maids. Thirty of them would work together to compress the warhead portion and the lacquer covering the entire shell gave it a refined look.

Moira 1st and Moira 3rd fired at the same time.

Wind and a great roar rose into the sky, but Miyako clicked her tongue in the center of it all.

Gods of war were growing visible between the distant buildings.

Moira 2nd, Gyes, and Sibyl were doing their best and the cannons were being fired nonstop, but the enemy was too numerous and those numbers were only

growing.

…Are we in trouble here?

According to the reports, the other groups had their hands full dealing with their own enemy reinforcements.

This was only the third minute, so they still had seven more minutes to go.

Miyako clenched her teeth and ground them. But then…

“Sister!!”

Moira 2nd cried out from the remote piloting device behind them.

She had seen something making its way down the road up ahead.

They were Lords gods of war. Those two-winged models were the most powerful among the Leviathan’s forces.

There were five of them and they were using their speed to break in.

“!”

Moira 1st and 3rd fired their acceleration cannons.

In that instant, the five enemies formed a row to charge the front lines.

Moira 3rd’s shell missed and 1st’s tore through the first of the enemies.

But the second enemy behind it used its sword to slice through the destroyed god of war.

The remaining four charged in without slowing down.

A moment later, green gods of war charged in from either side, swords at the ready.

These two were controlled by Moira 2nd.

But the second black god of war moved forward and swung its two swords to either side.

They collided.

The two black swords hit the green ones, but it took a sword as well.

All three were sliced in two at the same moment.

“————!!”

The third black one sliced through the second one from behind.

The remaining three continued forward. Their speed had not dropped. If anything, it had risen.

In an instant, the colors red and silver appeared before Miyako’s eyes.

It was Gyes and Sibyl.

Their gods of war moved in front to intercept the enemy.

The three black machines moved apart in response.

One moved right, one moved left, and one stayed in the center.

Gyes’s god of war moved left, Sibyl’s moved right, and the center black one passed between them and raised its blade toward Miyako.

It was coming, but someone responded.

“Ohhhhh!!”

It was Gyes.

Even as her god of war collided with the enemy on the left, she jumped toward the central enemy.

Her left arm was instantly severed by the god of war's blade.

It sounded like tearing fibers.

She was hit by an impact too, but Gyes continued with her duty.

One-handed, she drew ten swords from below her suit and controlled them all via gravity.

"You stand in the presence of our princess!!"

She thrust all ten swords into the neck of the god of war as it swung down its sword.

She could not cut the neck frame, but the various control conduits were all severed at once.

"…!"

After losing control, the god of war fell to its knees.

And it fell over.

Gyes also fell onto her side. She had used up her charged gravitational control, so she needed a moment to recover.

Realizing that, Miyako ran over to her.

But at that moment, she noticed another black god of war in the sky behind the collapsing one.

"Did it come from above!?"

This enemy was targeting Miyako, their commander.

It spread its wings and charged in, using the collapsing god of war as a shield.

The Moirai could not fire their cannons and the gods of war would not make it in time.

But at that moment…

"————!!"

Miyako saw something.

As the black god of war raised its sword and charged in, a light blue god of war appeared behind it.

That sky-colored god of war looked somehow like Typhon.

However, Miyako clearly saw a transparent woman standing on its chest.

Is that…? she wondered before Moira 1st gave a cry.

"Lady Artemis!?"

The blue god of war moved. It grabbed the wrist of the black god of war's raised arm.

"————!"

Artemis swung her arm and the blue god of war pulled out the black arm.

With a sound of breaking, the black god of war finally noticed this enemy.

But it was too late.

The blue god of war grabbed the black sword and looked at it just as Artemis did.

"…"

It threw it aside. She had not taken a liking to it.

Instead, it drew a sword from its own shoulder and the sharp blade emitted

the color of moonlight.

“————————”

The crescent moon sliced apart the nearly pitch black god of war.

Miyako was safe, but…

“Why?” she muttered.

Her shoulders had fallen, but someone placed their hand on them.

The hand belonged to a young man.

“Sorry about the wait, Miyako.”

The owner of the voice stepped up alongside her in white clothing and faced forward.

His yellow eyes looked to the woman standing on the light blue god of war. He looked to the blue eyed woman.

“Thank you.”

Hearing those words, the woman vanished with a smile.

“Now,” he said while extending a hand with a smile of his own. “What is the matter, Miyako?”

“Why?” she asked with her voice crumbling. “Why!?”

His smile deepened.

“Who was it that remade that god of war and placed Typhon’s pilot tank inside to stabilize it? And who was it that bothered to bring it here? Also…”

He looked to the sky. Light spread through that cloudy sky. It was the light of the Concept Core being released.

“This happened because the Tartaros Concept Core is being released. Everyone was urging me on. They were asking what kind of king lies around when his queen is working so very hard. …Yet I am the sun, so shouldn’t I be able to sleep at night?”

He laughed and held his hand even further out toward her.

“Let us go, Miyako.”

“I-I…”

She looked to the light blue god of war.

“I only know how to drive a motorcycle.”

“That is wonderful. I do not know how to drive a motorcycle.”

“U-um, and this will mean three people are piloting the thing!”

“We are all family, aren’t we?”

He looked straight at her before continuing.

“Do not cry, Miyako.”

He nodded.

“Let us go together to bring an end to those tears.”

●

The fourth minute began.

5th-Gear defended the western skies of Region 7 and those skies became an intense battlefield for all that flew.

American UCAT's concept space combat F-15ARs achieved thrust from a "falling" concept and achieved high mobility by using their normal accelerators for secondary thrust and turning.

The nozzles could turn their vectors to the side and had been enlarged, but they used their ailerons and other equipment to drift through the air with a pilot inside.

Those fighters were protected by blue mechanical dragons equipped with additional accelerators.

Those Blanca models were air superiority defense craft with normal cruising frames.

Those blue fighters and blue dragons tore at the black dragons.

"Don't rush this!" shouted a transmission. "Use groups of two to attack a single enemy! If you think you aren't going to make it, break away!"

They all looked down where a blue and white mechanical dragon was crouched down hiding in the roundabout in front of a Chuo Line station.

White light was escaping from below the dragon.

Thunder Fellow was releasing the Vesper Cannon's power.

Someone spoke over their communicator.

"Protect her."

They sounded like their teeth were clenched.

"It's our turn to protect her."

"Were you there back then?"

Finally, another voice spoke.

"So was I. I saw her flying through the sky.

"She was so fast. I couldn't turn around in time."

"Before that, I never thought I'd see something faster than you getting rejected."

The men laughed, but some of them could be heard getting shot down.

The flames of main cannons flew and the UCAT anti-air bullets were sometimes deflected even with a direct hit.

The enemy had the greater numbers.

The blue wind was being pushed back by the foul black wind.

"Bear with it!"

"That light down there is our flag! How can we call ourselves a free nation if we can't even protect that!?"

A voice reached them all. Even as they fought, their inspiring national anthem mixed in with the blowing wind.

It began with the first verse, moved on to the second verse, and eventually they were all singing together.

"On the shore, dimly seen through the mists of the deep."

Most of them tried for headshots fired from head-on.

"Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes."

The flowers of explosions reached some of them as well.

“What is that which the breeze, o’er the towering steep.”

But those remaining turned around.

“As it fitfully blows, now conceals, now discloses?”

They pursued the enemy from behind.

“Now it catches the gleam of the morning’s first beam.”

They chased them.

“In full glory reflected now shines on the stream.”

They fired on them.

“Tis the star-spangled banner! O long may it wave.”

They attacked them.

“O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave!”

The sky seemed to shatter as the battle continued. They never stopped fighting, but their enemy approached in great numbers.

“Don’t give up!!”

After all…

“No one ever gave up in our land of the free!!”

A sound and a voice answered that cry.

The sound was a metallic one. A power struck the sky and tore into the black dragons filling it.

“That’s right! That’s exactly right! We never give up! Do you understand? No one in our nation will give them ‘up’ – that is, the sky!!”

The owner of the voice stood on the station building near the blue and white mechanical dragon.

Everyone looked to that person.

“Colonel Odor!”

“No need! No need to call out to me! After all, I am a colonel and I am here! Whether you call out and confirm my presence or not, I will still be here. So fight!”

Odor raised his right arm and snapped his fingers.

“We will…! We will never give up this free sky! We decided to protect it long ago!!”

Countless figures responded by standing up from the station rooftop.

They were witches wearing black and white armored uniforms.

They all had broom-shaped flight devices next to them.

A witch with gray hair stood in the lead and she looked to the two men next to her.

“Okay, honey, Roger. We’re about to go give them a nice beating.”

“Good, good.”

Odor nodded twice and Roger pushed up his glasses.

“Diana, I see you intend to take the best role for yourself as usual.”

“My student is watching from down there, so I have to show off a little.”

Diana breathed in with her broom next to her.

“German UCAT aerial spell unit! Prepare for takeoff!”

“Testament!!”

As soon as they placed the brush of their brooms on the floor, a circle of light appeared below the brush.

More and more appeared from the front of the broom and into the sky, drawing out the course they would be taking.

“Get ready!!”

Diana sat sidesaddle on the vertical handle of the broom.

“!!”

The witch army whipped up the wind as they took flight.

With a roaring noise, they scattered paper into the sky.

Those papers flew about as glowing bullets or lines of power.

And not one of them gave up, feared, or fled.

But Roger suddenly frowned as he looked up into that high altitude battlefield.

“Is that…?”

It was the past. An event from another sky long ago was being replayed in this night sky.

The mechanical dragon pilots and witches all saw it as they flew through the sky.

A giant white mechanical dragon was flying with many smaller dragons around it.

The largest one was White Creation, the bearer of 5th-Gear’s Concept Core, and the others were an army including Xolotl 3.

They all knew that those dragons had abandoned 5th-Gear and come to Low-Gear in order to pursue Black Sun.

In the past, White Creation spoke to them all.

“We must stop this enemy who could be seen as another version of myself.”

A black gate was visible in that vast sky. Black Sun had created the giant gate to escape into Low-Gear.

White Creation accelerated toward it.

“We must stop him to protect the world of men. After all…”

White Creation continued.

“He too was created to protect!”

●

The fifth minute began.

6th-Gear defended the eastern skies of Region 3 as an intense battle reached them.

A unit made of the naturalized 6th-Gear residents in UCAT’s standard and special divisions was charged with defense here. They were a large force, but they could only fight on the surface and some of them were fairly inexperienced.

They had been attacked by the mechanical dragons that they were least suited to handle.

Those giant hunks of metal could fly through the sky and mow down anything

on the surface. Not only that, but they had angels with them.

The metal mowed them down while the wings exterminated them.

“Don’t falter! We have gods of war!”

The gods of war developed by Japanese UCAT attacked with their cannons and swords, but they lacked the ground forces needed to assist them.

Once the people were blown away, the gods of war had no support and had to fall back lest they be isolated.

“Dammit!”

Boldman looked to the sealing barrier behind them.

Izumo was handling the Concept Core release ceremony in a supermarket parking lot.

V-Sw sat next to the boy with light escaping into the sky.

“Man, it’s cold. That light isn’t warming me up much.”

“That’s because I’m cool,” replied the weapon.

Boldman considered running over and knocking the boy to the ground, but unfortunately, the method to release the Concept Core had to fit both the weapon and its user.

“I never imagined our world’s concepts would be so easygoing.”

“Isn’t that just how things are in the world of the gods?”

That comment came from some men with dark skin.

They were either born of the same Gear or at least had some 6th-Gear blood. They were all injured, but they had smiles on their faces.

“Commander, did you know that 6th-Gear is split between a region of destruction, a region of rebirth, and a region of stillness?”

“They tried to dam up the rivers flowing between the regions – especially the river of destruction – to increase our Gear’s power.”

Boldman had heard this story from his mother.

“They created Concept Dragon Vritra to dam up that river of destruction. And to maintain a balance on the rebirth side, they created Vajra, a sword made with the same amount of concepts. But the politicians with the power to control Vajra and Vritra tried to use them to control reincarnation and a coup d’etat broke out.”

“The people decided to get rid of Vajra since it had only caused conflict. The young man who had borrowed it and contained Vritra was meant to be given all of the calamity,” said one. “And that young man was Izumo’s grandfather. He was given our misfortune. But our ancestors came to this world and ended up getting homesick.”

Boldman nodded, smiled bitterly, and lifted the equipment in his hand.

“And we took back our misfortune, didn’t we? …Resupply complete! Swap out with the vanguard!”

The men stood up along with him and nodded.

Boldman looked across them and sighed.

“Raise your hand if you ever thought you might as well die.”

They all raised their hand, so Boldman gave a deep, quiet nod.

“I understand the feeling,” he began. “But never think that again. Let’s go.”

He began to run. After a short break to resupply and reconfirm their past, they moved up ahead, ahead to the battlefield.

They made their way to the black mechanical dragons and angels.

When they did, a wind blew alongside them.

It took human form and wore a black vest over a white armored uniform.

“British UCAT!?”

“Indeed,” replied a middle-aged man with slicked back hair and a sword on his back.

Similarly equipped people lined up alongside him and so did a group in white maid uniforms.

“We are British UCAT’s concept combat unit and support automatons. Our automatons aren’t on the level of German UCAT, but we are more than competent when it comes to combat and tea.”

“Why would Britain be helping us?”

“Learn some history, gentlemen.”

With those words, the men and automatons drew their swords and faced forward.

“Men, trust in your lion’s heart and spirit’s will as you aim to dance with the darkness!”

He breathed in.

“The fog is thin tonight! A lovely darkness awaits us!!”

He then matched his speed to Boldman’s.

“Now, gentlemen, I would like you to teach us one thing. Our great nation may know how to slay monsters, but we are a tad lacking when it comes to legends of dragon slaying.”

He held his blade over his shoulder as he ran.

“Please tell us how to defeat these dragons. Do that, and I will teach you some history and how to make some excellent tea.”

●

The sixth minute began.

Chinese UCAT representative Chao Yu acted as 7th-Gear’s leader as he worked with American UCAT’s tank unit to attack the enemy.

The four balls were already rising into the sky.

They had been released, but they required stabilizing.

…And I will not let anyone interfere!

But the enemy’s numbers were absurd. Even Chao Yu was left short of breath dealing with them all.

A few of the American UCAT tanks had already stopped moving and now functioned as barrier walls.

But the enemy was still coming, so they had to continue fighting.

“Don’t falter!”

Chao used an acceleration charm to jump and threw aside several flying angels as he did so.

“We are the world at the moment!”

“Yes, sir!”

Those in green armored uniforms ran alongside each other. They took a sideways stance as they approached the enemy gods of war and mechanical dragons and then they rotated their arms.

“Fnn!”

Their powerful stomp stopped the mechanical dragons and gods of war in their tracks.

The next group charged in, flipped forcefully through the air, and collided with the enemy feet-first.

…Let them shake!

The masses of metal were blown away and the functioning tanks fired on them.

The enemy was broken and knocked away.

“————!”

But more enemies arrived.

The men who had charged in were exterminated before they could retreat, but…

“Even so, do not falter!!”

Chao let out the white breath of his shouting voice.

“A nation of one billion stands behind us! And the entire world stands behind that!!”

“Yes, sir!!”

They caught their breath, formed rows, and took their sideways stances.

They opened their mouths to perfectly synchronize their breathing.

They sang their national anthem: the March of the Volunteers.

“Qǐlái! Búyuàn zuò núlì de rénmen!” (Arise, we who refuse to be slaves!)

They stared down their enemy with the intense light in their eyes.

“Bǎ wǒmen de xuèròu, zhùchéng wǒmen xīn de Chángchéng!” (With our very flesh and blood let us build our new Great Wall!)

They took the first step forward.

“Zhōnghuá mínzú dào liǎo zuì wēixiǎn de shíhòu.” (The peoples of China are at their most critical time.)

They used small stomps to lightly fill their bodies with strength.

“Měi ge rén bèipò zhe fāchū zuìhòu de hǒushēng.” (Everybody must roar defiance.)

They used that strength to take an even stronger step forward.

“Qǐlái! Qǐlái! Qǐlái!” (Arise! Arise! Arise!)

They stomped right before the enemy’s eyes.

“Wǒmen wànzhòng yìxīn, Màozhe dírén de pàohuǒ, qiánjìn!” (Millions of

people become one, Braving the enemy's gunfire, March on!)

They pushed their fists forward.

"Màozhe dírén de pàohuǒ, qiánjìn! Qiánjìn! Qiánjìn!" (Braving the enemy's gunfire, March on! March on! March on!)

Those fists landed.

"Jìn!" (On!)

The enemy was blown away.

And as their vision grew clear, a color reached them.

Whiteness was falling from the sky.

"It's snow."

The roar of battle and the changes to the air had brought it.

Snow was falling on Tokyo.

Snowflakes blossomed and fell through the darkness.

When Chao saw the scattering white, he let out a breath.

…This is going to give me a chill.

But, he thought as he moved forward and loosened his suit's collar.

"It feels nice after warming up so much. And it makes a good story for when I get back home!"

●

The seventh minute began.

Abram defended the southeast for 9th-Gear and he watched the dragon of flames and shadows expanding in the sky.

That was the concept dragon of the Gear made from light and darkness.

Not even the snow was enough to slow it down as it curved its long body.

It grew ever larger like Yamata, as if to show itself off to the Leviathan above.

Abram was currently fighting alongside Japanese UCAT's special division.

From the beginning, he had not been using B-Sp. He was using a spear reinforced by a piercing concept.

The front line was pushing the enemy back.

That was mostly because the enemy forces had been worn down by 3rd to the south and 5th to the west.

Not many of the enemy forces were being sent this way.

"We can do this! Keep attacking and moving on to the next piece of cover! If you aren't on the front line, provide covering fire!"

Just as their front line tried to push forward, Abram heard a sudden sound in the sky.

A roar filled the snowy sky. It came from deep in the Leviathan's throat far above.

"Is this…?"

The Leviathan was assisting its troops.

However, it was not firing or striking.

"Is it a concept!? From the excess positive ones?"

Abram and the others could not hear the emitted concept text, but the angels, mechanical dragons, and gods of war could.

No one knew what it was, but its effects became immediately clear.

Movement filled the wreckage and remains scattered around.

The destroyed but still movable ones suddenly began to get up.

It was an application of 10th-Gear's healing concept.

Almost all of the destroyed enemy forces stood back up while healing themselves.

It was almost like those messengers of heaven were immortal.

●

The recovery filled every region with confusion.

Any of the pure-white or black dolls, gods of war, and mechanical dragons that had not been completely destroyed were restarted and began healing their armor and motors.

This included about seventy percent of the previously defeated enemies.

The enemy was supplied with immediate reinforcements.

They were not dead.

Unless their head was completely destroyed, they could continue to think and to move.

Those who still lived as dolls recovered in an instant.

Countless black forms stood up in the snow.

In 3rd-Gear's region, the black gods of war abandoned behind Miyako's group stood up. In 5th-Gear's region, the broken and crashed mechanical dragons flew heroically back into the sky.

Most of the battlefields were caught in the middle and the front line was annihilated.

The front lines had pushed in on the black attacks, so the reactivated black machines appeared between the front line and the rear guard.

They all clenched their teeth at being surrounded like this.

"Don't tell me the enemy was planning this!"

The Leviathan gave no answer. The great white mechanical dragon simply floated calmly in the sky.

Then a new turn of events began.

UCAT had advanced while wearing down the enemy's numbers, but now the heavenly host recovered those worn down numbers and surrounded UCAT.

Most of the recovered enemy charged in from behind UCAT. The UCAT forces were split apart and their numbers dropped rapidly.

They had three minutes left, but the color black began to fill the battlefield.

The black momentum permeated the entire battlefield instead of just the center.

"————!!"

They did not stop.

The momentum of destruction continued devouring the people with no sign of stopping.

●

"Fall back!!"

Abram shouted across the chaotic battlefield.

He also told himself not to panic. The rear guard remained behind them to protect the stability of the Concept Core.

That was their foundation.

…I'm worried about the center, but we have to get back there!

So…

"Focus on falling back to the rear guard!"

But black gods of war appeared behind him.

They were the pure-white ones that had been crushed when Sayama had run through.

They now stood back up after evolving into black bodies.

Everyone who saw them said the same thing.

"Is it hopeless?"

Would the enemy continue to get back up no matter what they did or how badly they crushed them?

But a sudden voice rang out.

"It is not hopeless."

Abram turned around to find that aged voice had come from a maid standing in front of the gods of war.

The tall doll wearing a maid uniform kept its back turned as it spoke.

"I'll help you out since this has gotten pretty bad."

The voice belonged to the old manager.

At the same time, black armored uniforms appeared around Abram.

They stopped their high-speed movement and they were all just as old and dark-skinned as him.

However, their eyes were sharp and they kneeled in the snow.

"We are the former 9th-Gear members of the former Army," one said. "Our king, give us your command."

Abram let out a white breath and listened to the distant sounds of battle.

"I am no king."

"But you saved my life during my very first battle."

"Still, I am no king," insisted Abram.

He ignored the kneeling men, moved forward, and passed by the maid doll.

"Don't throw your life away. If you try to move forward to do that, then I'll take that life from behind. It would be a shame to let the enemy have it."

"Yes, sir."

Abram heard a voice behind him.

"Those familiar words have filled my body more than the chill of the snow!"

He heard them all stand up.

Abram then ran toward the enemy before him and he heard running feet following behind him.

The gods of war also began to move, but Abram raised his weapon regardless.

“Focus on regrouping with the rear guard!” he said. “Once we arrive there, the situation will be no different from the beginning of this battle! And since we have already defeated them once, assume that we have the advantage!!”

●

The eighth minute began.

Kazami held the north for 10th-Gear and she looked up into the snowy night sky.

The northern region was primarily defended by students and French UCAT’s god of war unit.

The students made up for their weaker attack power with numbers and the excellent defenses of the god of war unit allowed them to swiftly carry out Abram’s orders.

How to retreat had been lesson #1 when the students had been trained.

Also, Kazami fought amongst them once they returned to the rear guard.

They fought on a road. It was the northern portion of Circular Route 7.

The black army awaited down that road.

The enemy had straightened out their formation while the UCAT forces retreated and caught their breath.

They had two minutes left. Holing up in one spot seemed like the best option for enduring for such a small amount of time, but the enemy came at them from the sky. And if they did not wear down the enemy’s numbers, another Leviathan-controlled army would rush their way.

Kazami looked to the back of the god of war unit and then looked up.

A giant dragon of light filled the snowy sky.

Some traces of the Concept Core must have remained in G-Sp2 because words appeared on its console.

“Are you having fun?”

“Yes.”

Unexpectedly, the dragon asked another question.

“Is this goodbye?”

“Don’t be stupid,” she said. “You’re going to be absorbed by this world, so we’ll always be together.”

“Will it be fun?”

“It will,” she replied. “Everything will still be fun.”

“Good,” said G-Sp2. “I’m glad.”

It said more.

“You are okay now.”

Kazami gasped when she saw that.

Two years before, when she had first met G-Sp in Okutama, she had escaped the battle, lost the enemy pursuers, and taken a break.

She had been very worried then and that was when G-Sp had first contacted her.

“Are you okay?”

They had been together ever since.

And now G-Sp2 had said the reverse of that.

She was okay now.

And yet the world might change in two minutes’ time.

Still…

“Yes, I am okay now,” she said. “And it’s all thanks to you. Thank you.”

The dragon curved in the sky.

“I’m glad.”

That was all.

No more new words appeared.

Light floated in the sky. It seemed to be dancing, it seemed troubled, and yet it seemed happy.

Kazami smiled a little and opened G-Sp2’s Cowling. She pulled out the metal cylinder that had contained the Concept Core, but there was no weight or light inside it anymore.

…It’s been freed into the sky.

The light was watching over them from beyond the falling snow.

She muttered her thanks once more and inserted the cylinder containing a photonic attack concept that was attached to the back of her waist.

Was it sentimentality that made her attach the empty cylinder to her waist?

When she faced forward again, the gods of war asked a question.

“Commander, give us our orders.”

“Okay then,” replied Kazami.

She began to walk forward. She passed by the legs of the gods of war, spread her wings, raised her spear, and placed that spear of light in the heavens.

“Everyone,” she shouted. “Charge!!”

“Testament!!”

With countless yells, the gods of war did just that.

The black group responded to the explosion of wind by charging in from the opposite side.

Amid the movement, Kazami heard a song. The pilots of the charging gods of war were singing.

It was France’s national anthem.

“Sing, our god of war pilots!”

They roared, charged, and produced sounds of breaking metal.

“Marianne has guided us here!!”

They sang.

“Allons, enfants de la Patrie, Le jour de gloire est arrive. (Arise, children of the Fatherland, the day of glory has arrived.)

“Contre nous, de la tyrannie, L’étendard sanglant est levé. (Against us, tyranny’s bloody banner is raised.)

“L’étendard sanglant est levé. (Bloody banner is raised.)

“Entendez-vous dans les campagnes, Mugir ces féroces soldats? (Do you hear, in the countryside, the roar of those ferocious soldiers?)

“Ils viennent jusque dans nos bras, Égorger nos fils, nos compagnes! (They’re coming right into our arms to cut the throats of our sons, our women!)

“Aux armes, citoyens, Formez vos bataillons. (To arms, citizens, form your battalions.)

“Marchons, marchons, Qu’un sang impur Abreuve nos sillons! (Let’s march, let’s march! Let an impure blood water our furrows!)”

The students responded to the song by following the silver giants.

Kazami watched as everyone ran by on either side of her.

Suddenly, someone stopped alongside her.

It was a fellow third year wearing glasses. The girl held a long sword and had a bandage on her smiling cheek.

“How have you been lately?”

Kazami was briefly confused, but then she smiled bitterly.

“I’ve been having lots of fun.”

“Good,” said the girl. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Kazami nodded, too.

But those students were not the only ones who appeared from behind.

White forms slowly lined up alongside her.

Jord and the rest of them were wearing white clothing.

“We are the combat gods of 10th-Gear. We decided to show up since the weak people were asking for help.”

The elderly man in the lead gave a feigned look of shock in Kazami’s direction.

“But I certainly didn’t expect to find a Valkyrie in the lead. When did we become the heroic dead?”

They all laughed at that.

“We had heard from Jord that a strange girl with wings was wielding our Concept Core. In that case, you truly are the Valkyrie that called us here.”

The men and women, both young and old, shouted in agreement behind him.

Some of them were actual Valkyries, but they were all looking her way.

“Guide us to the battlefield. As those who have lost our home, we should be able to help in this battle of Ragnarok.”

“Yes, we will no longer fight for the world of the gods! We will fight proudly on this Valkyrie’s guidance!”

“Is that so?”

Kazami smiled, raised her glowing spear toward the sky, and spread her

wings.

She heard them cheer as she took flight.

She raised her wings and flew above them all.

And she sang.

La Marseillaise was a song born during the French Revolution and it was a song of the people. It was not a song of the weak being saved from the rulers; it was a song of the weak standing up on their own.

She knew all that from her father and so she sang.

The rear guard used their acoustic weapons to provide a brass accompaniment.

“——————”

The gods of war joined in as they spread metallic sounds around.

“Amour sacré de la Patrie, Conduis, soutiens nos bras vengeurs. (Sacred love of the Fatherland, lead, support our avenging arms.)

“Liberté, Liberté chérie, Combats avec tes défenseurs. (Liberty, cherished Liberty, fight with thy defenders.)

“Combats avec tes défenseurs. (Fight with thy defenders.)

“Sous nos drapeaux que la victoire Accoure à tes mâles accents. (Under our flags, shall victory hurry to thy manly accents.)

“Que tes ennemis expirants Voient ton triomphe et notre gloire! (That thy expiring enemies see thy triumph and our glory!)

“Aux armes, citoyens, Formez vos bataillons. (To arms, citizens, form your battalions.)

“Marchons, marchons, Qu’un sang impur Abreuve nos sillons! (Let’s march, let’s march! Let an impure blood water our furrows!)”

Kazami used her voice to circle above the enemy army, swing down her spear, and give a shout.

“Shinjou! Sayama! …It’s your turn now!!”

●

The ninth minute began.

Directly below the Leviathan, the eastern entrance of Shinjuku Station had once more become a scene of intense fighting.

The great pressure of the enemy had pushed the defense gravity lens down to only thirty meters above the ground.

And the surrounding enemies were resurrected without end.

But no one on that battlefield had given up.

“Don’t worry!!”

Shinjou yelled as she fired from the middle of them all.

She spun Ex-St around to the back of her hips like a baton and its shots tore through the gods of war trying to slip under the defense lens. Also…

“There!”

The muzzle hopped up behind her and she fired to silence a group of automatons approaching from behind.

“Next!”

She continued to fire after flipping Ex-St back to its proper spot on her shoulder.

Everyone ducked down as her rapid-fire shots tore by in all 360 degrees.

…I have no blind spot!

But a shadow approached from above.

The Leviathan must have realized this was its last chance.

The descending black army looked like a single blob.

A glance at the clock showed they had forty-six seconds until the concepts of the ten dragons were fully released.

The aerial unit was visible dropping bombs above the Leviathan, but they could not send anyone down below the Leviathan.

Forty-five seconds remained.

Shinjou’s group had to do something on their own.

Forty-four seconds remained.

Ex-St had seventeen shots stored up.

Forty-three seconds.

Shinjou gave a shout.

“#8-san!”

Forty-two seconds.

As she shouted, she collapsed backwards.

Forty-one seconds.

After pointing Ex-St skyward, she placed the center of the enemy army in her sight.

Forty seconds.

A moment later, the barrier in the sky vanished.

Realizing what Shinjou wanted, #8 had deactivated the gravity lens.

Thirty-nine seconds.

The enemies standing on the lens lost their support and fell.

Thirty-eight seconds.

They fell.

Thirty-seven seconds.

But Shinjou did not care.

Thirty-six seconds.

“Achohhhhh!!”

Thirty-five seconds.

She fired repeatedly.

Thirty-four seconds.

She fired her seventeen bomber shots, but they stopped in midair.

Thirty-three seconds.

The force of seventeen consecutive shots stopped at fifteen meters above her and formed a massive reaction sphere.

#8 and the other automatons had performed another technique instead of the gravity lens. They were gathering up all of the bomber shots to fire them all at once.

Thirty-two seconds.

The force of seventeen shots fused into one. The seventeen seams vanished from the giant white light and it seemed to ripple like a viscous liquid.

Thirty-one seconds.

Shinjou started to get back up.

Thirty seconds.

At that moment, countless black forms charged forward from above the nearby buildings.

Twenty-nine seconds.

They were automatons.

Twenty-eight seconds.

Most likely, they were the regenerated ones from the other battlefields. The Leviathan's excess forces had been sent here.

Twenty-seven seconds.

"Oh, no!" shouted #8. "Shinjou-sama!"

Twenty-six seconds.

As #8's cry suggested, the enemy's target was Shinjou who could communicate with Wanambi.

Twenty-five seconds.

The enemy rushed in, passing by the shimmering that was beginning to take form.

Twenty-four seconds.

She saw blades. Around a dozen of them. And more enemies were on their way behind them.

Twenty-three seconds.

The next thing she knew, someone was holding her in their arms. It was…

Twenty-two seconds.

"Mikoku-san!?"

Twenty-one seconds.

Even with Mikoku leaning over her, Shinjou thought it was hopeless. The blades would stab straight through Mikoku who no longer had her regeneration philosopher's stone.

Twenty seconds.

…It's all over!

Nineteen seconds.

But her thoughts came true in a different way.

Eighteen seconds.

Everything came to a stop.

Seventeen seconds.

Everyone saw what had happened right in front of Shinjou and Mikoku.

Sixteen seconds.

All of the blades had been stopped. They were stopped by a man's body.

Fifteen seconds.

It was Hajji.

Fourteen seconds.

Hajji had stopped the dozen blades by letting them stab through his back and out his chest.

Thirteen seconds.

"Father!?"

Twelve seconds.

Shinjou's body shook from Mikoku's cry.

Eleven seconds.

But Hajji's expression changed when he saw Mikoku. He smiled without hiding it.

Ten seconds.

"Hey," he said.

Nine seconds.

"See, Mikoku? You can protect someone after all."

Eight seconds.

He began to move. He turned around, instantly broke through the automatons, and charged toward those still approaching.

Seven seconds.

"Never forget! And even as you tremble, desire the world! After all, you currently bear everything we stand for! That may be painful, you may give in to anxiety or anger, and it may not be what you wished for. But…"

Six seconds.

Hajji gave a shout.

Five seconds.

"Mikoku, this is something only you can wish for!"

●

Unable even to breathe, Hajji charged forward.

He had to crush the enemies rushing in from outside the gravity lens.

…Yes.

I really was an awful father for Mikoku and Shino, he belatedly realized.

But, he thought as he remembered their days together. *We may have done nothing but fight, we may have done nothing but hold grudges, and we may have told nothing but lies, but the dinner table and living room were so full of life.*

…Yes, that's right.

Hajji opened his left eye.

…Hey, Shahrnavaz.

He exposed to the world that destructive power and everything else he had received from her.

Their world had not contained this black sky, falling snow, or chilly wind.

He spoke with a voiceless voice.

“Isn’t this a wonderful place?”

A moment later, he charged into the advancing enemy forces and activated a certain philosopher’s stone.

The stone transformed emotions into an explosion. It was 9th-Gear’s suicide attack weapon.

But the emotion he detonated was not his anger, his resentment, or his sorrow.

It was the emotion one always felt when thinking of someone precious.

Hajji did not know what it was called.

He simply muttered someone’s name and annihilated the enemy reinforcements.

●

Four seconds.

Shinjou and Mikoku watched Hajji leave.

Three seconds.

Mikoku said nothing, but Shinjou could tell the girl’s hands were clenched so tightly they had grown white.

Two seconds.

So Shinjou stood up and raised her hand toward the reaction sphere overhead.

One second.

She gave a shout.

“Sayama-kun!!”

●

The white bullet flew upwards and punched through the black cascade of the enemy.

The white power roasted the center, causing the black cascade to implode.

The black waterfall drew a circle in the sky and scattered from below.

Not even any fragments remained.

There was only a clear sky and the white light’s ascent.

The rising light collided with the defense field below the Leviathan.

“!!”

It broke.

The impact was powerful enough to bend the Leviathan’s giant body.

The great dragon shook.

An earthquake seemed to fill the air itself and everything trembled.

The heavenly halo burst in an instant. Like glass thrown to the floor, some pieces turned to spray and others scattered as shards.

The wind was whipped up.

The disappearance of that massive field set the air in motion.

The white ring crumbled and could not maintain its form.

The Leviathan had lost its defensive power.

On the earth, the heavenly host and UCAT clashed. While in the sky…

“Sayama-kun!!”

A voice on the earth called to the sky.

It called to the boy in the sky.

●

That boy, Sayama, stood in the heavens.

He rested on his heels, lightly spread his arms, spun around, and looked in every direction.

His eyes saw the flames of war spreading across everything below and he saw no sign of the clash ending.

The fight continued, but he had a thought as he looked down on it all.

…Splendid.

“Am I really allowed something like this?”

After asking that, he clapped his hands and raised his voice.

“Everyone! Can you hear the sounds of your struggle against the world!?”

And…

“Everyone! Can you feel the strength of choosing the world!?”

Also…

“Everyone!! Do you understand!?”

He forcefully raised his spread arms.

“Make sure you understand that this is a splendid night!!”

His reverberating voice gave the word to begin it all.

“Listen.”

He spoke to the world itself.

“I will say it now! The surname Sayama indicates a villain!”

●

Brunhild listened.

She listened while receiving several injuries and being protected by the heroic dead and dreams of the past.

Sayama’s voice reached her from the sky.

“Everyone! We stand on a crossroads for the world!”

●

Kashima listened.

He listened as he used his Cowling Sword to slice through the enemy

automatons and made his way to the front line.

“Everyone! The world exists right before your eyes!”

●

Hiba and Mikage listened.

They listened as they worked with a light blue god of war to destroy the enemy gods of war.

“Listen, everyone! Tonight’s foes are a spoiled bunch who wish to destroy the current world and create a new one!”

●

Heo and Harakawa listened.

They listened while joining their comrades’ fight in the sky.

“And listen carefully, everyone! We are lacking, we are insufficient, and we can never do anything right. But…”

●

Izumo listened.

He listened as he inserted a new cylinder in V-Sw and made sure to stick the old cylinder in his pocket.

“We need not see that as a bad thing! We are delinquents! You could say we are the world’s delinquents! But if we prefer to be self-deprecating and stubborn, we would instead simply call ourselves ‘bad’! Listen, everyone.”

●

Chao Yu listened.

He listened in the snow while pulling a woman’s photo from his pocket. It was a picture of his aunt who had never aged.

“We were enjoying our delinquent life, staring out the classroom window, and thinking about going somewhere, but now a delinquent-hating enemy has come to destroy us, school and all! Such nonsense!”

●

Abram listened.

He listened while working with his brethren to destroy the enemy and hearing of the former friends who had passed away.

“Listen, everyone. Delinquents do not punch people. But they are free to punch fools! And listen carefully, everyone!”

●

Kazami listened.

She listened while swinging her spear to cut through the enemy army with her comrades.

“Stand up, all you delinquents! We need not be good! But never come to a stop and always wish to leave your mark on this world! So stand up and pave the way forward, you delinquents! And to do that…”

●

Shinjou listened.

She listened while looking up at the Leviathan below the scattering snow.

“Listen, everyone. I have a single command! Ahead. Ahead. Go ahead!!”

She nodded.

“We will advance, strike, and bring together the worlds we have created. And to do that, we must move ourselves ahead with our strength in our right hand and our will in our left!!”

She heard his voice.

“Where is your answer!?”

●

Sayama listened.

Shouting voices carried a word to him up in the sky: testament.

It referred to a contract, to the Bible, and to a promise made by god. It was a holy word with meaning to both parties.

Tes, tes, tes.

We make our contract here.

Every power in the world was gathered in Tokyo and that word of promise rang out like it was a radio announcement broadcast every night.

And they all began to move in order to fulfill their promise with Sayama.

So Sayama responded, too. He prepared to lower his arms to give the ceremonial announcement.

But he suddenly realized something: two figures had appeared on either side of them.

…Is this…?

The one on his right wore a military uniform. The one on his left wore a white armored uniform.

These were images of when this sealing ceremony had been performed in the past. To provide the divine protection of success, Baku had summoned the past of the Sayama surname. Sayama looked to the two behind him.

…To think we would be speaking in unison now of all times!

He smiled bitterly and raised his arm toward the snowy heavens, synchronized with the two behind him.

The three of them also opened their mouths at once.

“I will say it now.”

The three Sayamas spoke in unison.

“The surname Sayama indicates a villain!”

First, his father swung down his right arm and gave a shout.

“With this act, I feel no regret toward the future!”

Next, his grandfather swung down his left arm and gave a shout.

“With this act, I feel no repentance toward the past!”

And Sayama gave a shout with his left hand raised toward heaven.

“With this act, I feel no hesitation toward the past or the future!!”

They all rotated their arm to audibly raise their forearm.

“The surname Sayama commands the world!!”

The three forcefully swung their arms forward with a loud snapping of the sleeve.

“World,” they shouted. “Do as I wish by moving!!”

●

A moment later, the ten released concept lights pierced through the concept space.

They came from the eight directions, the heavens, and the earth.

Writing, blowing rain, the Tartaros, watery mist, the windy sky, life and destruction, the sage’s body, shimmering heat, light and shadow, and the divine tree.

The ten world dragons instantly flew to their proper positions.

They all pierced through the Leviathan.

They tore through it.

And the fifteen kilometer Leviathan had its armor broken, burned, and frozen. Its internal frame was destroyed and it bounced through the sky.

“…!!”

It was intensely destroyed.

The dragon’s scream was as endless as the sounds of its destruction.

That destruction covered its entire surface, but it was darkness and light that left the opposite side.

Without fusing back together, the dispersed light and darkness spread through the sky like the falling snow.

Above the Leviathan, the negative concept storage pallets in the concept creation facility were destroyed.

The ten pallets instantly froze white and shattered inward.

The Leviathan’s body bent.

A tremor ran through the heavens and the careless were blown from their feet by the great wind that was pushed down to the surface.

But it did not end there.

There was movement in the sky and on the earth.

That movement came from a girl and a boy.

Pulled by the concepts under their care, the boy in the heavens descended and the girl on the earth ascended.

At the midpoint in the sky, they passed by and exchanged something in their possession.

It was a single metal chip.

The girl handed over the negative one and the boy handed over the positive one.

Concept power was passing through that space between heaven and earth.

Georgius's power to destroy concepts could ride that current to any point.

And that included the Leviathan's core.

They had a single target.

The negative concepts had solidified in the Leviathan's core, so they would strike it and destroy it from both heaven and earth.

That would tear apart the negative concepts so they would be pulled away by the released positive concepts and utterly dispersed.

The negative concepts began to activate when gathered, so they would cool down once scattered so completely.

To do that, the girl used her right hand when she arrived in the snowy heavens.

And the boy used his left hand when he arrived on the snow-covered earth.

The two of them placed the opposite symbol chip in the Georgius gauntlet on their hand.

"Shinjou-kun!"

They gave a shout of confirmation.

"Sayama-kun!!"

The white and black lights released from heaven and earth pierced through the Leviathan.

They slammed into it.

A black spray spread through the sky and a white spray burst as if leading the way.

A white and black flash of light rippled outward in the snowy sky.

●

Shinjou flipped around in midair.

The light from Georgius was calming down and she slowly fell toward the earth below while gradually picking up speed.

She slipped below the waves of scattered concept light.

…It's over.

She looked up at the Leviathan overhead as she fell faster than the snow.

She saw the automatons preparing to catch her down below.

Sayama was also there. As was a scorch-marked Ooshiro.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she looked up into the sky again.

"————!!" She noticed a certain phenomenon.

And before she could even think, her cellphone rang in her waist armor pocket.

She heard Kazami's voice.

"Shinjou! Can you see this!? Something isn't right!"

Beyond Kazami's panicked voice, she heard cannon fire.

"The enemy is still fighting! And…the spread of the negative concepts has stopped! Even the spray of positive concepts is struggling to expand!"

Shinjou understood because she could see the cause from closer than anyone.

"The Leviathan is…regenerating."

The destroyed areas were returning to normal. And something was appearing from within it.

"The black angels, gods of war, and mechanical dragons are forming a new halo!!"

●

The Leviathan was holding back the negative concepts as they tried to scatter away.

Using the heavenly host contained inside, it had formed a defensive halo inside itself to restrain the penetrative power of the positive concepts. Then, it had restrained the scattering negative concepts.

It was currently healing itself at a rapid pace, but where did this power come from?

The Leviathan knew that power most likely came from Top-Gear.

Top-Gear had most likely developed something approaching immortality.

That power was allowing the Leviathan to heal.

And once it was fully healed, it could pull the negative concepts back in.

It would draw in the positive concepts at the same time.

The Leviathan felt joy at that fact.

The lost positive concepts would be regained in their perfect form.

It could do it. It could do it.

It would be able to do it now.

It would be able to change the world, and quite soon at that.

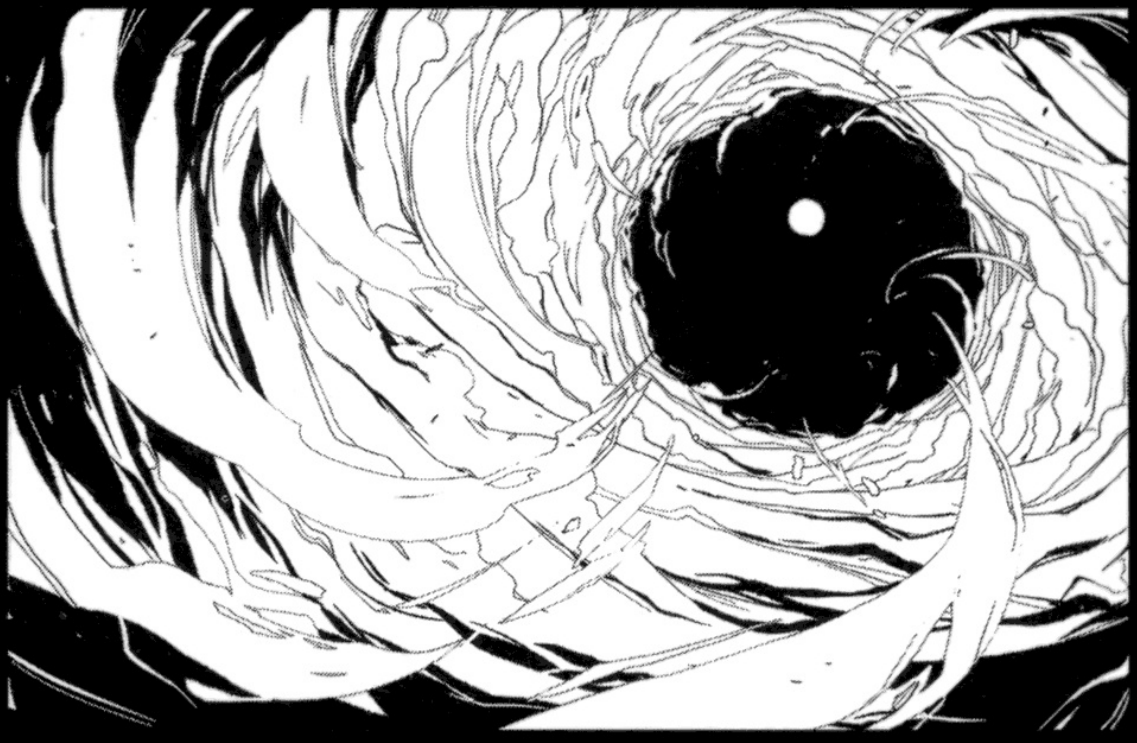
It could change the world.

To achieve that goal, the Leviathan gave a roar.

That roar shook everything.

Chapter 27

“Holy Festival of Resistance”



Sing that holy song and every world will hear it
That child I am worried about sings it constantly
I will take their hand to dance
Even though I am no longer an angel

●

The intense battle resumed across the city.

Sayama and the others immediately reorganized below the newly created black halo.

The halo was not yet complete and the flow of concepts was still pulling in ten directions.

So Sayama exchanged a glance with Shinjou when she walked over.

“We need to hit the Leviathan with Georgius again from the surface.”

“You can’t!” shouted #8 as she pointed up toward heaven. “The halo’s defense will weaken it too much to reach from here!”

But countless voices could be heard over their communicators.

They conveyed the state of the various battlefields.

And they all questioned whether their power could reach.

“How can we possibly win!?”

On top of that, the Leviathan began firing.

The power it had been using on the concept creation and activation was now being used for cannon fire.

Each shot blew away a space with a diameter of nearly five hundred meters.

The roar and blowing wind instantly filled the concept space with storms.

The great wind transformed the snow into a blizzard.

Amid the reverberating roar and wind, only the Leviathan held a stable position and continued firing.

There was a safe zone. To not damage the concepts, the cannons never fired directly below.

The sounds of retreat arrived over the communicators, but the enemy automatons got in the way.

The dolls did not care if they were destroyed.

The people panicked as the blasts rained down through the blizzard like punishment from heaven.

And a desperate fray developed on each battlefield.

The voices coming over the communicators were no longer those of warriors.

They were voices of people seeking help as they tried to escape the overwhelming power of heaven or the shouts of anger toward heaven.

Was destruction their only option?

Was there nothing to rely on?

Was there nothing to organize around?

But a sudden sound of tuning came over the communicators.

It came from the one managing all of the communications. Specifically, it came from Ooki as she operated the concept space communication device.

In front of Shinjuku Station, she spoke even as explosive blasts washed over her and dirt rained down on her.

“Um, everyone?”

She led them all with a smile.

“It’s time to sing.”

With that, she began playing an external transmission. It was a TV broadcast from the outside world.

It was a live worldwide broadcast of a concert being held in the center of Shinjuku and it had just reached the time to request an encore.

A certain sound played. A single singing voice filled that world of battle and heaven-born disaster.

The song was a hymn: Silent Night.

●

A woman stood on the main stage in front of the snowy Shinjuku Station.

She had once introduced herself to the world as an idol and she had become a singer of songs she wrote and composed herself.

Her songs had been popular enough that the people of those days could still sing along, but since she had retired soon after marrying, few people knew her anymore even if they remembered the songs.

That was the kind of woman she was.

Snow had begun to fall from Shinjuku’s sky once the time for an encore had arrived.

The young people in front of the main stage had been confused when she had stepped out in a white dress.

Some had asked who she was, some had called her old, and others had thought she stepped onto the stage by mistake.

But she had silently bowed.

Without speaking a word, she had released her voice before the microphone.

And that was all it took for her to bring silence to the world.

●

Silent night, Holy night
All’s asleep, one sole light,
Just the faithful and holy pair,
Lovely boy-child with curly hair,
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace

●

“Silent night, Holy night.”

Amidst the intense fighting, Kazami heard a voice in the wind that was not even blowing.

“Mom!?”

●

“God’s Son laughs, o how bright.”

The international artists who had come to Shinjuku sang with her in the snow.

It was a song foretelling the birth of the holy one.

●

“Love from your holy lips shines clear.”

A singing voice rang through the battlefield.

Someone shouted out as if in response or as if clinging to it.

They wanted to forget their screams, forget the anger of a salvation betrayed, and forget their exhaustion.

So they sang.

The song seemed to spread through them all until everyone had joined in.

●

“As the dawn of salvation draws near.”

The song reached the world. It seemed to ignore the concept wall and all other barriers.

●

“Jesus, Lord, with your birth.”

In the silence of Shinjuku, someone raised their voice to follow along.

The voices sounded embarrassed at first, but they grew louder once the lyrics were displayed on the electronic signs around the area.

They grew louder and louder.

●

“Jesus, Lord, with your birth.”

It was just before noon in America, but that song was sung in the Christmas-decorated plaza of a city.

Both the young and the suitcase-carrying adults sang along below the winter sky.

Some did not sing aloud, but they all at least sang kindly along in their heart as they walked through the streets of that holy festival.

●

“Silent night, Holy night.”

At the main external UCAT camp in Yokosuka, supplies and reinforcements were sent into the concept space while relatives of those inside waited on standby in the wharf warehouse.

Those family members sat on long benches inside and their eyes and ears were focused on the TV sitting next to the whiteboard on which Izumo Retsu was copying down information.

Sitting in the back row, Arnavaz stared into the distance with her unseeing

eyes and sang along with the song she heard from the TV.

●

“Brought the world peace tonight.”

In a Middle Eastern bar, a young man polished an assault rifle during the early morning.

He looked over at the radio when he heard a singing voice.

“——————”

But he quickly looked back down.

He continued maintaining his weapon, but he did not turn off the radio.

●

“From the heavens’ golden height.”

In Akigawa, Ryouko watched the TV alone in the Tamiya house’s main hall. Her shoulders kept tempo with the song as she munched on a rice cracker.

“It’s Christmas, isn’t it?” she muttered before standing up because she thought she heard something from the entranceway.

She turned up the TV’s volume so she could hear the song and opened the front door.

“——————”

The snow had piled up there.

That area of white had grown enough to bury the raised stepping stones in the yard.

She suddenly thought she saw someone at the main gate.

She called a girl’s name and narrowed her eyes.

“…?”

There was no one there. Only the falling snow.

But Ryouko noticed fresh dog footprints running from the main gate to the entrance.

For some reason, there were no footprints leaving the entrance.

She then spotted four canned drinks in a plastic bag by the entrance.

She picked up the cold drinks and looked up into the sky.

The snow was falling.

Her lips moved to match the song audible from behind.

●

“Shows the grace of His holy might.”

It reached China, India, Russia, Germany, Africa, France, and England.

It reached Siegfried and Hiba Ryuutetsu’s ears in Okutama.

The song was sent out both by television and radio.

Those who did not know its meaning listened curiously and those who did listened to the meaning of the lyrics.

●

“Jesus, as man on this earth.”

At a house in Tanashi, Natsu had just finished calling her parents to thank them for the present. She sat at the table after slapping the cheeks that had reddened from both nerves and joy.

After noticing how worked up she was, she turned on the TV to have something to do.

When she heard the song playing there, she also heard Harumi moving in the back room.

Worried she had woken the child, she went to check and found Harumi’s open eyes looking outside.

It had started snowing at some point.

“Ah,” said Natsu as she gently picked up Harumi and moved to the window.

The snow was accumulating outside, where she could hear the song.

Natsu showed Harumi the snow while her lips followed along with the TV’s song.

She sang aloud.

●

“Jesus, as man on this earth.”

Inside the concept space, the raging wind and cannon fire was joined by music to match the song.

The students’ brass acoustic weapons half forcibly and half hopefully formed ranks and began to play.

The holy one’s music was reaching the concept space.

The accompaniment reached everyone’s ears and that sound pressure joined the voices.

●

“Silent night, Holy night.”

The entire world sang the same song. Some knew their neighbors were singing too and some did not, but the song filled the world regardless.

Some did not sing loudly and some kept it in a corner of their mind, but the song was sung and everyone came to know that it prophesied the birth of the holy one.

And they also came to know that day was today.

●

“Where today all the might.”

At an orphanage church atop a hill in Sakai, the children sang along with the TV.

The director woman prepared to cut the Christmas cake she had prepared for

everyone, but she noticed a sudden visitor outside.

It was the master of the small church at the bottom of the hill. That old woman had told Shinjou Yukio's child about this place.

The director woman quickly opened the large window and spoke to her.

"Former director."

"Merry Christmas. I heard Yukio's child visited again the other day. And with someone named Sayama no less."

She smiled bitterly.

"I thought it might be a coincidence, but to think she really was Yukio's child. …Next time she visits, maybe I should tell her some old stories."

"What's your excuse for hiding who you were? Was it god's trial for her?"

"No." The old woman smiled bitterly as she listened to the song. "I just thought that's what Yukio or Old Sayama would have done."

●

"Of His fatherly love us graced."

The Leviathan remembered.

It did not understand or know this song.

But it remembered it. Fragments of the song remained in its memories.

When had it heard this song?

●

"And then Jesus, as brother embraced."

Amid the wind and song, Sayama sang along to control himself.

"——————"

He nodded.

When he realized he and Shinjou were storing the song within themselves, he asked #8 a question.

"#8-kun. Please, tell me how to win."

The automaton hung her head a little, but…

"There is only one way."

She pointed up at the Leviathan in the windy sky.

"The halo protecting the Leviathan is not made up of very many wings. It is inadequate, so…"

A voice responded. It was a mechanical voice.

"So we only need to disturb their position? We only need to break through the halo and ascend into the sky?"

It was Alex.

He was defending against the wind at the edge of the automatons' defense field.

"I am the only one who can break through this turbulence. …I will go."

●

“All the peoples on earth.”

Tatsumi gave a reflexive shout as she leaned against Alex.

“You can’t!!”

She ignored the eyes that turned her way and she faced Alex.

“How many mechanical dragons do you think are up there!? If you force yourself that hard while you’re already falling apart, you’ll die! Don’t you understand that!?”

“But Tatsumi, the American UCAT mechanical dragons and Thunder Fellow cannot get here through this wind and cannon fire. Thunder Fellow in particular is busy protecting the others.”

“That doesn’t mean-…”

“This is something only I can do,” said Alex. “If I do not do it, my soul will rot.”

“Then let it rot! It’s better than dying! I…I…”

Tatsumi trailed off and she looked down at her right hand.

“I thought you were supposed to stop my tears.”

“Don’t worry.”

Alex dropped a piece of himself.

It was a single bolt.

“This has not been infected by the negative concepts. It is a living part of me.”

He then gently floated into the air.

“Alex!”

“Don’t worry, Tatsumi. I am always with you. …And I will show you proof.”

“Proof?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I will show you something that will convince you I am always there.”

Those were his final words to Tatsumi.

The mechanical dragon whipped up the wind, stood up in the air, and nodded toward Sayama.

“Toh!!”

His speed erupted in an instant.

That dragon blade defied the wind to fly straight up toward the heavens.

●

“All the peoples on earth.”

Alex flew higher and higher.

Despite the wind and air pressure, his accelerators did the talking and forced him ever higher.

Attacks arrived from directly above.

They were mechanical dragons. He was targeted by defense dragons that were not part of the halo.

It was difficult to even see them with their great relative speed, but Alex’s mind was light.

His destruction was nigh. He knew his body would fall apart and he would be

nothing but a mind.

And that sharpened his heart.

“Silent night, Holy night.”

As he listened to the song and honed his heart, he could see everything.

His armor broke and flew through the air, but he did not care since it was not a fatal blow.

Without panicking, he used his thrust to rocket into the sky.

The halo grew larger in his view.

His heart grew clear.

And he heard the song.

“Long we hoped that He might.”

Oh, what a lovely song.

He had heard it once long ago. It had been in a church on a hill rather than inside Noah.

Had Tatsumi been with him then?

He did not remember.

His mind was already in heaven.

The enemy was there.

One of the black mechanical dragons was commanding those forming the halo.

If he destroyed it, they would lose unified control and a hole would open in the halo.

It was a Seraph model.

It had been born of the same prototype as him and it had been created by Noah.

It was the perfect opponent.

So he flew on.

The black Seraph responded by leaving the other dragons.

It understood, so Alex pursued the black speed.

It was fast.

The enemy’s top speed was equal to or greater than Alex’s.

Even as he was nearly tossed about by the sharp turns, Alex continued pursuit.

“!?”

An attack reached him. They were homing bullets.

Sixty-four of them arrived at once from a bucket on the back of his foe.

…This enemy…

Alex realized it had been designed to fight while being pursued, but he continued straight on.

The barrage widened and he cut through before it could tighten back around him.

A few continued pursuit, so he closed his wings and…

“…!”

He fired as if to launch himself forward.

The black escaped the bright lightning attack by launching itself upwards.

Alex continued pursuit.

The inertial Gs strained his body, knocked a few components loose, and brought his body closer to the end.

But he heard the song.

“As our Lord, free us of wrath.”

It was a lovely song.

And his soul felt his heart of justice.

He was confident that everyone looking up into the sky had stopped crying and lamenting and were instead standing up.

His heart grew clear.

He dodged.

He pursued.

He was only eight meters from the enemy.

He moved.

“!”

He fired bullets, but the enemy circled behind him like a swinging pendulum.

He turned around with a roll and tried to get in another shot, but the enemy fired a barrage of missiles while moving forward.

Before the barrage had even spread out, Alex barrel rolled and passed right through them.

He seemed to side flip through gap in the barrage.

He accelerated afterwards and stayed on the enemy’s tail, but the Seraph was already flying up even higher.

Alex kept after it while the creaking of metal filled him.

They exchanged fire as if passing the attacks back and forth.

Bullets fluttered through the sky and the trails of evasive maneuvers were drawn with white smoke.

Their speed never dropped.

He heard the song.

“Since times of our fathers He hath.”

More components fell away.

But his heart was light.

The two machines flew above the Leviathan.

They would swoop left or right at the last second to avoid the Leviathan’s armor and then return to attack each other.

They dodged, charged, swung themselves around, and continued on.

Their bullets fired through the snowy sky and into the Leviathan’s armor rushing by below.

The sounds were no longer audible and Alex’s creaking body informed him of his speed.

His body was falling.

But his soul had not rotted. He could also hear the song.

“Promised to spare all mankind.”
The Leviathan’s mechanical dragon launch zone waited up ahead.
It was a large, wide tunnel.
He and the Seraph flew inside.
He targeted the Seraph from behind as it kept low.
His body was approaching its limit.
He knew his end would soon arrive.
So why was his heart so clear?
He did not know.
…But…
Would Tatsumi understand?
With that thought, he fired.
A moment later, he received a sudden impact instead of a hit.
It came from the side.
A single mechanical dragon had fired while hidden in a corner of the launch zone.

●

“Promised to spare all mankind.”
The bullet tore into him.
“————!?”
He knew he was done for.
This hit was fatal.
It had hit his main skeletal frame. His crumbling body had desperately clung to that frame.
It was half broken now.
His body bent, his speed dropped, and the Seraph’s accelerator light grew more distant.
“…!”
He saw a barrage fired from the back of the Seraph.

●

“Silent night, Holy night.”
The Leviathan understood the footage sent from the Seraph.
This was the end of the enemy.
The persistent enemy army’s resistance would end now.
So it needed to return the Seraph to its original position and have it control the halo.
With the halo’s protection, the Leviathan could change the world.
But then the Leviathan noticed static coming from the Seraph.
“…?”
It saw the images from the Seraph’s vision.
The enemy was still alive and pursuing the Seraph.

Why? wondered the Leviathan. *Why wasn't the enemy destroyed?*

The answer arrived via the Seraph's transmission.

"Justice never dies!"

●

"Shepherds first see the sight."

Alex had made a split second decision.

He had spotted something above the approaching missiles.

Something was skewered into the ceiling.

"The normal cruising frame of my archenemy Thunder Fellow!"

Thunder Fellow had ejected that frame as a diversion during its battle with Alex.

The steel main frame was there, so Alex had not hesitated.

He had fired on the ceiling, broken it, and let Thunder Fellow's frame drop into the air.

"Combine!!"

He cast aside his own frame as his body began to fall apart.

He used the motors of his legs to forcibly grasp Thunder Fellow's frame.

It was slender and a bit long, but it was sturdy.

…This should work for a short time!

With that thought, Alex accelerated.

He passed above the missiles by flying just below the ceiling and he pursued the Seraph.

"Transformation!!"

The frame fixed into place around him.

"Alex! Final Episode Mode!!"

He accelerated.

He followed the Seraph as they approached the end of the launch zone tunnel.

He knew where it would go: straight up.

That was the simplest of feints.

Do you really think justice will fall for something like that?

Oh, what a wonderful sky. Such a nice wind, but it is lacking one thing.

He continued on in search of that thing.

He pursued as the Seraph used its great thrust to rise into the heavens.

"————!!"

He swung his body around to avoid the multi-warhead rounds fired his way.

He soared through the wind to dodge every attack sent his way.

"Ohhh!"

He pursued. The enemy attacked, but he did not care.

"Ohhhhhh!!"

He dodged by stretching upward, swinging his body, and hopping up into the sky.

"Oh."

His cry continued without end as he moved toward the Seraph.

Sensing danger, the Seraph tried to swing itself out of his sights.

He did not let it escape. A tremor filled the fleeing enemy's movements.

It was afraid.

You fool, thought Alex. *Fearing justice is proof you are evil.*

His heart grew clear.

That was all there was now.

His soul would not rot now. Nor would his body fall part. He was sure of it now.

…For I am overflowing with justice!!

"Told by angelic Alleluja."

The Seraph entered the center of his sights, so he sent forth an attack.

His attack was acceleration. It was something only the owner of great thrust could accomplish.

"Alex Driver!!"

Using the mechanical dragon's front ram, Alex pierced into the Seraph from behind.

It was a suicide attack.

He destroyed his own body in the process, so it was truly a last resort.

But the Seraph did indeed bend, writhe as it attempted and failed to escape, and split in two.

"————!!"

It let out a scream-like explosion.

●

"Sounding everywhere, both near and far."

Alex was now only a mind as he arrived in the airspace of heaven.

His body was positioned vertically. The momentum of his acceleration had died out and he slowly came to a stop in midair.

He was directly below the snowing clouds.

His entire body peeled apart.

But this was not due to the attacks he had received. His body had simply reached its end.

…Tatsumi.

He could hear the song.

" 'Christ the Savior is here.' "

It was a lovely song and he was sure he would be able to hear it in the future too.

She would remember once she saw the proof.

And he would surely sing this song with her.

" 'Christ the Savior is here.' "

He would sing with what he left behind in this world.

"They never would have won without me."

Alex could no longer see anything, so he simply spoke.

“Justice…shall prevail!!”

●

An explosion filled the sky.

The mechanical dragon’s explosion was widened by an explosion of water vapor and it produced a certain phenomenon.

It parted the snow clouds filling the sky.

In that snowy, song-filled sky, the clouds spread apart and revealed the proof of that mechanical dragon’s existence.

The round moon was revealed.

That moon was rising into the center of the great heavens above.

●

The song had ended in Shinjuku.

The song had ended throughout the world.

Some places applauded and others met it with silence.

And the people in Shinjuku thought they saw some kind of light in the sky.

The sky was covered by snow clouds, but for some reason, they thought they saw the moon there.

●

Below the Leviathan, a rip was detected in the defense halo.

“An excellent show of justice!” shouted Sayama with his eyebrows raised.

The others nodded and he held Shinjou close.

“Shinjou-kun, prepare Georgius for-…”

“Sayama-sama! Wait!”

As soon as #8 interrupted, a swelling of air filled the sky.

In the heavens above, something was breaking through the wind that had grown white with snow.

Sayama recognized it.

…The Leviathan!?

The great mechanical dragon had its mouth – and thus main cannon – turned their way.

“Do not tell me…!”

When he saw light deep in the Leviathan’s mouth, he held Shinjou protectively in his arms.

“Is it willing to damage the concepts now!?”

It had decided it could remake them if need be.

The fang-filled maw opened wide as if to devour them.

“…!!”

The Leviathan fired its main cannon toward Sayama and the others.

●

As soon as the white blast of light was fired, a single figure took action.

It was Tatsumi.

She looked up at the light in the dragon's mouth.

…*Ah.*

She suddenly realized that she might be able to negate that attack.

But she tried to reject the idea: it was reckless and there was no way she could do it.

After all, her body was avoiding combat now.

She could not hold a single knife and she would even injure herself on its blade.

She did not know if she could pull off that defensive technique.

But Typhon sat behind her and she held a single bolt in her hand.

…*Alex.*

When she looked up at the Leviathan's face in the sky, she saw the proof he had left behind.

But his song had come to a stop.

Silent Night had only six verses. Once they were complete, the song came to an end.

But…

"————?"

Tatsumi heard the song. It should have come to an end, but she heard it once more.

Just as she began wondering what that meant, Ooki spoke quietly from the seat at the communications equipment.

"Everyone…is singing."

She could hear the song.

"They're all singing even without anyone guiding them!!"

●

She saw it from the snowy Shinjuku stage.

She was preparing to leave the stage, but they all raised their voices as if to hold her there.

"————!!"

This was a festival night. And to prove it, they all sang that hymn.

Some stayed and some left, but even those that left carried the song with them down the roads or into the train station.

There was no stopping the song now.

And from the hidden edge of the stage, her husband gave her the go-ahead.

So she inhaled and spread her arms without a microphone this time.

She sang.

Her voice rang out as just one of many.

An eight-colored CG Christmas tree was displayed on the giant station monitor behind her.

And the song did not end.

●

“Silent night, Holy night.”

A moment later, Tatsumi began to run.

She stuck her hands in her pockets and put on the remote control rings.

“Typhon!!”

She raced forward.

On the way, she had Typhon pick her up and she climbed to the white god of war’s shoulder.

Her legs were trembling. Her entire body was trembling. Her hands and fingers were too.

But…

“All’s asleep, one sole light.”

Her heart was not.

“Automatons!”

As soon as she raised her voice, the Leviathan’s main cannon strike arrived.

She raised her left arm.

She swung Typhon’s left fist toward the white light arriving at a slightly diagonal angle.

And the automatons replied to her will.

The gravity lens vanished from the sky and instead formed a gravitational control shield in front of Typhon’s fist.

As soon as the blast hit, Tatsumi knew her heart was warning her body.

She understood that the powerful current of the main cannon was trying to push her back. So…

“————!”

She activated her technique while squeezing Alex’s bolt in her right hand.

“————!!”

●

“Just the faithful and holy pair.”

On the northern battlefield, Kazami saw something within the raging wind.

Something happened to the Leviathan’s main cannon blast.

“It bent!?”

She had thought they were done for, but it bent to a shallower diagonal angle and swept across the earth.

The white light poured west southwest from Shinjuku.

The earth exploded and the wind blew like mad, but both the main cannon and the power bending it continued without ceasing.

Then Kazami saw the Leviathan’s back tremble as the main cannon grew even

thicker.

This was the final attack.

●

"Lovely boy-child with curly hair."

A great power was headed her way.

Tatsumi could tell from the feel of the air.

She also knew she could not defend against it.

…What do I do!?

As she hesitated and thought, she turned her head slightly skyward and saw his proof.

The moon was there.

It felt like he was watching her.

So she made up her mind.

She would stop it. She would negate this main cannon blast no matter what.

"Alex…!"

With that cry, she placed the bolt in her mouth.

She held it between her back teeth on the right, gathered her strength, and bit through it.

Normally, her teeth would have broken first, but Tatsumi had perfected her technique to the point that she could pulverize the bolt and swallow it.

"Sleep in heavenly peace."

She swallowed him and leaped upwards.

She jumped toward the Leviathan's greatest cannon blast.

"Alex!"

She stood on Typhon's left arm and slammed her own right hand against the main cannon of light.

●

"Sleep in heavenly peace."

The light was instantly redirected into the western sky.

The blast of light roasted the air and tore into the wind until the Leviathan's breath came to an end.

"!!"

Once it did, the light burst.

Tatsumi had endured it.

Everyone saw that half of Typhon's body had mostly melted and its left arm was gone. Similarly, Tatsumi had lost her right arm from the shoulder down.

She looked to the others after stepping down on the ground, gasping for breath.

She held her shoulder as blood spilled from it.

"Kh!?"

She looked up to see the Leviathan turning to face them once more.

Her knees bent and her mouth twisted.

“It’s firing a second shot!?”

But they all saw something as the Leviathan covering the heavens prepared to fire its second main cannon blast.

“…!!”

For some reason, it raised its head, as if in displeasure.

“Why?”

As they all stared up in confusion, they realized the Leviathan had stopped firing its secondary cannons at some point.

●

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah stood inside the Leviathan’s base engine room.

Her broken body could barely walk, so it was faster to fly with her broken wings.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

Her creator spoke to her.

“Take care of the new world.”

○ **December 25, 2005**

Just after Noah’s main body had become the Leviathan, she had extracted several of her memories. They were imperfect, but they were original to her and she could not let anyone else have them.

But the amount of memories had been so great that she had entered a short sleep state to optimize them.

By the time she had recovered, the positive concepts were already on the verge of being released.

○ **December 25, 2005**

“Silent night, Holy night.”

Noah listened to the song playing over the transmission.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

“Don’t worry.”

Her creator then asked a question.

“Do you remember the song I taught you?”

Noah answered that she did remember. Yes, it remained in her memory.

○ **December 25, 2005**

“God’s Son laughs, o how bright.”

Noah listened to the song playing over the transmission.

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah knew her main body was losing control and that it was destroying the human world.

○ **December 25, 2005**

And Noah began to resist the Leviathan.

She did so by manually returning the Leviathan to its Noah form.

She had a single worry.

The Leviathan was working at full power.

After repeatedly creating the negative and positive concepts, it had completely overloaded. That self-destruction had originally been meant to release the concepts, but its output as the Leviathan was too great and it would begin to self-destruct and explode even if it was stopped.

She could not allow that. It would mean the annihilation of the people on the battlefield.

But by returning to its Noah form, the time until the explosion could be extended even if the overload itself was still unavoidable.

○ **December 25, 2005**

“Love from your holy lips shines clear.”

Noah listened to the song playing over the transmission.

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah began her work.

She was able to begin at once, but a single problem presented itself.

The black automatons, gods of war, and mechanical dragons that had left her control were headed her way down the wide main corridor.

Most likely, they intended to destroy her.

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah found someone opposing the black army that appeared.

It was Seraph No. 0 and Lords No. 0 that had been directly created from the prototypes.

They had fallen before, but Noah did not know why they had shown up now as her allies.

She simply continued her work.

○ **December 25, 2005**

“As the dawn of salvation draws near.”

Noah listened to the song playing over the transmission.

○ **December 25, 2005**

Her right arm was destroyed.

○ **December 25, 2005**

Her left leg was destroyed. Her left thigh was destroyed immediately afterwards.

○ **December 25, 2005**

“Jesus, Lord, with your birth.”

Noah listened to the song playing over the transmission.

○ **December 25, 2005**

She completed her work.

To restrain the Leviathan’s own will, an external attack would need to provide a decisive blow, but if that was done, the Leviathan would return to being Noah.

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah saw a white mechanical dragon and god of war protecting her amidst

the wreckage of the black army.
However, the white machines were broken and would no longer move.
○ **December 25, 2005**
"Jesus, Lord, with your birth."
Noah listened to the song playing over the transmission.
○ **"Before" December 25, 1995**
"Don't worry."
Her creator then asked a question.
"Do you remember the song I taught you?"
Noah answered that she did remember. Yes, it remained in her memory.
○ **"Before" December 25, 1995**
Her creator spoke to her.
"Take care of the new world."
She was told to ring her bell.
○ **"Before" December 25, 1993**
She wanted to try ringing it right away.
○ **"Before" December 25, 1993**
This was something only she could do.
○ **December 25, 2005**
Noah spoke to the god of war and mechanical dragon that had protected her.
"Thank you."
That was a nostalgic phrase.
She had some faint memories of being told those words many times long ago.
Who had been the first one?
Had it been her master's…?
No, she had something more important to think about.
When had she first used those words?
○ **"Before" December 25, 1986**
Her creator had spoken upon first seeing her.
"Wow, she looks just like me. How cute."
Noah had given her programmed response.
"Thank you very much. Over."
○ **"Before" December 25, 1993**
Noah was given many different things on the day the children had decided was her birthday.
"Thank you very much. Over."
Once she responded like that, the group including her creator's child gave her something.
The group was made up of Sadagiri, Mikoku, Shino, Alex, and Tatsumi.
They gave her a song.
Her creator played the organ and the children sang.
Noah stored the song in her memories.
It was a new memory.

It was an original memory that was hers alone.
Once the children finished singing, she spoke again.
“Thank you.”
○ **December 25, 2005**
Why had she not said “over” back then?
And where was that song in her memories?
○ **December 25, 2005**
“Silent night, Holy night
“Brought the world peace tonight,
“From the heavens’ golden height
“Shows the grace of His holy might
“Jesus, as man on this earth
“Jesus, as man on this earth”
Noah listened to the song playing over the transmission.
○ **December 25, 2005**
Noah began to walk in search of what only she could do.
She began to walk toward the bell.
○ **December 25, 2005**
A moment later, Noah understood something.
The Leviathan had been pierced by a power from the earth.

●

“Silent night, Holy night.”
In the blowing wind and below the great raging mechanical dragon, Sayama held Shinjou close.
The two of them held hands with the opposing left and right Georgiuses.
Unexpectedly, Georgius’s will gave a shout.
It was the same voice as when Sayama had first put Georgius on.
“I remain with the surnames of Sayama and Shinjou!!”
Shinjou nodded at the voice and looked to him.
“That’s my dad’s voice, isn’t it?”
“Yes.”
He nodded and squeezed her hand to make sure her father’s will would reach her.
His intention must have gotten through because she squeezed back.
“Where today all the might.”
A moment later, they moved close and pulled their arms back as if dancing.
That was when a shadow of the past appeared behind them.
…Is this…?
Sayama saw the inside of a church lit by small candles.
Despite the darkness, a man and woman faced each other with troubled smiles.
Music was playing from a radio-cassette player on top of the organ.

“Of His fatherly love us graced.”

“Sorry that this is the only song I ever play.”

“I already knew you were a thorough person.”

The words of the man in glasses caused the woman to smile bitterly.

“And I already knew lab coats are the only clothes you own.”

The two of them seemed to place Sayama and Shinjou between themselves and they held each other’s hands.

They awkwardly pulled each other close and began to dance.

They danced.

“And then Jesus, as brother embraced.”

Then, in addition to the past, everyone gathered around Sayama and Shinjou.

It was Team Leviathan.

Kazami and Izumo, Hiba and Mikage in Susamikado, and Heo and Harakawa in Thunder Fellow.

They all surrounded them, raised their eyebrows in smiles, and sent shimmering heat back from their accelerators.

“Let’s settle this.”

“Yeah, but I’ll be taking the best part for myself.”

“Ryuuji-kun, what’s the matter?”

“Well… This doesn’t really feel like our kind of thing.”

“Anyway, I’m glad everyone’s okay.”

“Not a single one of you is ‘okay’ on the mental front, but at least your bodies are sturdy.”

“That’s for sure,” they all replied with bitter smiles.

Sayama then spoke while looking at the man and woman dancing around him.

“Happiness can be found at any time.”

He spoke to the others while pulling Shinjou in close as the most important person to him.

“Let us go, Shinjou-kun, to our happiness.”

Shinjou grew red.

“Sure, sure,” said the others as they shrugged.

“Oh?” he said as he turned back their way. “Were you all still here?”

“You’d better remember that later.” Kazami spread her wings. “And we still have to discuss some things for the student council, so make sure you come right back, okay? And there’s a lot we all want to say, right? Like what we gained here and what we lost here.”

“Do any of us tell those things to anyone but our beloved?”

“Shut up,” said Kazami as she took flight.

Izumo climbed onto Susamikado’s shoulder and Thunder Fellow blasted into the sky.

終わりのクロニクル
02

●

“All the peoples on earth.”

Team Leviathan flew through the hole Alex had torn and Tatsumi had protected.

They were now armed with mere Cowling weapons that had no Concept Cores.

But they were Team Leviathan.

That fact had not changed.

Thunder Fellow flew into the black army, twisted its body to dodge the intercepting warheads, and tore apart the enemy. Its path took it to the hole Alex had opened.

Its rising attacks smashed the enemy and red flowers bloomed from the black seeds in the sky.

Those flowers in the windy and snowy sky decorated Tokyo’s night.

“Kazami!!”

“I know!!”

Kazami spun around, fired, and flew through the opening Thunder Fellow had made.

There was now a great tree of bursting flowers decorating the sky.

The halo crumbled vertically and became a spire-shaped ornament of flames.

It was a giant tree of blazing battle.

And finally…

“Kaku! Hiba and Mikage too!!”

“Nn.”

“Just leave it to me.”

Susamikado flew down the center with a white contrail behind it.

As if providing more decoration, Izumo and Susamikado’s blades sliced through the remaining surge of black.

The flowers scattering through the sky, trailed smoke, and almost looked like fireworks.

In the end, the world’s largest Christmas tree surrounded the Leviathan with the moon adorning the top.

And the ones creating the central trunk stood directly below the Leviathan.

It was Sayama and Shinjou.

●

“All the peoples on earth.”

Their teammates broke through the wind and tore into the falling snow up above.

Sayama and Shinjou looked up at the heavenly decorations.

“Silent night, Holy night.”

Amid the hymn, the two of them slowly looked each other in the eye,

synchronized their breathing, and swung.

“Shinjou-kun.”

“…Right.”

“Long we hoped that He might.”

Sayama and Shinjou swayed their bodies as if to match the past displayed around them.

Shinjou moved away once, spun along with the woman, and returned.

“————”

They both held their Georgius hand to the side and wrapped the opposite hand around the other’s waist.

They looked in the direction their hand pointed.

“Hey, am I dancing right?”

“Do not worry. No one is watching.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

Matching the voices from the past, they moved back toward each other and used that momentum to thrust their arms skyward.

“As our Lord, free us of wrath.”

With his hand in Shinjou’s, Sayama raised his arm toward heaven.

“…!!”

A moment later, a white and black light pierced through Leviathan on its way toward heaven.

A trunk of light ran through the center of the sky’s decorations.

It broke through. It tore through the Leviathan’s body.

The regeneration concept attempted to keep the hole from spreading, but Georgius’s concept destruction power further widened the hole.

“————!!”

But the Leviathan roared and resisted.

“Since times of our fathers He hath.”

It whipped up the wind, forcibly moved its body, and tried to change the position of the piercing power.

“It can still move!?”

Sayama trembled from Georgius’s power and shouted into the wind.

Suddenly, a third hand joined theirs to restrain the tremor.

It belonged to a girl in a black armored uniform.

It was Mikoku’s.

●

Shinjou saw a blue philosopher’s stone in Mikoku’s hand.

“This contains my regeneration concept! It is the same one the Leviathan has. So…if you include this in Georgius’s power, it should be able to repel the Leviathan’s power and destroy it!”

“A-are you sure!?” asked Shinjou.

Sayama shouted into the wind to continue for Shinjou.

“Doesn’t that contain everything you were left with!?”

Mikoku’s expression twisted in the wind, but…

“That is fine. I too am something they left and I am still here. So…”

She hung her head, but Shinjou still heard what she said.

“Please let me help you end this!”

Shinjou’s answer was to agree, but first she exchanged a glance with Sayama.

…Let’s do it!

“Promised to spare all mankind.”

Shinjou and Sayama held Mikoku’s philosopher’s stone in their hands.

Mikoku looked up in surprise and the two of them smiled at her.

“Testament!!”

Sayama laughed.

“Let us give the proclamation to every concept!”

At the same time, an especially powerful light and darkness pierced the Leviathan and they squeezed their hands tight.

“Let me say it now! As opposites…”

Shinjou raised her voice with Sayama.

“We proclaim that the wills of Sayama and Shinjou shall always be together!”

As she repeated after him, Shinjou tilted her head at the fact that he said “wills” instead of “surnames”, but she trusted him and finished the statement.

…He probably has an idea about that.

She knew he would tell her about it eventually, so she simply held his words in her heart for the time being.

The words “Mikoto” and “Sadagiri” shook the concepts that were becoming a pure spray.

- **—The wills of Sayama and Shinjou shall always be together.**

It became a concept text and raced throughout the concept space.

A moment later, an especially great light of opposites tore into the dragon.

At the same time, cannon blasts and sword strikes from Team Leviathan shook the Leviathan in the heavens.

“Promised to spare all mankind.”

The great dragon was finally defeated.

And the light of concepts scattered through the sky.

Chapter 28

“What I Desire”

If I were a bell
I would not want to ring again and again
I would want a single ring so great
I could never ring again

●

There was a world of glowing white light.

It was a world filled with concept spray.

The ground was Shinjuku's, but the sky was not.

That world was located below where Noah floated even after being destroyed.

Sayama and Shinjou stood there all alone, looking at their clasped hands.

Georgius's light was weakening before their eyes.

"So it's finally happened. …Will we be caught in the blast when Noah overloads?"

"I think Noah's overload has also grown unstable due to Georgius's influence. The real countdown begins once this light vanishes, Shinjou-kun."

"I see." Shinjou saw Sayama pull acceleration charms from his pocket. "We have to head after the others who already retreated, don't we? You're going to be running again, Sayama-kun."

"I always do, Shinjou-kun. But do not worry. I will not let go of your hand. And…"

He spoke with his usual expressionless look.

"I will always be with you, Shinjou-kun."

"And I with you, Sayama-kun."

She answered with a slight smile and she wondered what kind of a smile it was.

But when she looked at Georgius's light and at the surrounding concept light, she asked about something else.

"What's going to happen now?"

"Noah will explode and the two of us will have a fun time escaping. …What is that look for?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Our normal life awaits us once we leave here."

Sayama glanced around them.

"The Leviathan Road will end, but cleaning up afterwards is a job for the adults. So the direct problem facing us will be deciding on the next student council. …How about you try running for president?"

"I'm not so sure about that."

But it was not a bad idea. She even thought about trying it if it would be fun.

"I guess we'll continue our student lives like that, continue on to college, and probably end up working for the betterment of the world."

"And once we marry, I would like two children. …Oh, but if the children would be like you, Shinjou-kun, then I suppose one would be enough."

"L-let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"Ha ha ha," he laughed.

Shinjou belatedly realized that laugh of his was actually a way to hide his

embarrassment.

He truly was a complex and welcome person.

Then, Sayama suddenly opened his mouth again.

“Either way, I think the two of us will create a world when we grow up.”

“Let’s not exaggerate.”

As soon as she said that, he turned her way.

He gave her an astonished look but also smiled a little.

“Had you really not figured this out? Releasing the concepts means filling the world with the traits of the other Gears and making them reality.”

“Meaning?”

Unsure what he meant, she tilted her head and he explained.

“Meaning the underworld, heaven, reincarnation, destruction and rebirth, and everything else will become part of reality. The gods of war will surely become man’s property and lose the title of ‘god’. And the mechanical dragons will become flying ships and travel as far as outer space. Also…mankind will harness the power of words and pictures in a world shared with the other races.”

He continued calmly.

“This world will not be immortal, but from now on, it will be guided by the concepts of reincarnation and inheritance. You, I, and all the others are sure to meet again at any time in the future. Sometimes our memories and wills will be passed along and sometimes they will be forgotten, but it will all help this world evolve into an even better world. …If necessary, we might even become each other’s enemies.”

“——————”

“Now, Shinjou-kun, many problems await us. The adults will have to put in some work at first, but by the time we enter society, the hidden side of the world should be organized enough for us to have some real fun working there.”

Shinjou sort of understood what he meant by “having fun”.

“In other words, the world will be organized fairly well but there will still be plenty of holes and problems? Instead of being the world that destroyed eleven others, it will be a single, incredibly young world newly created by gathering them all together?”

“Yes,” said Sayama before suddenly saying more. “So can I hope for something from that world? Can I hope for my own battle to change the world? But one other than the Leviathan Road that was left for me by the past?”

He seemed to be asking himself that more than her and that was proof of his hesitation.

…If you do what you truly want to, we’ll all follow you.

So she smiled, nodded, and said what only she could say to him.

“I think you can hope for that. We’ll all help you. But…make sure to invite me first of all, okay?”

She had already made up her mind, so she spoke her decision aloud with a bitter smile.

“I’ll be with you, Sayama-kun. …I’ll be watching over you to make sure you don’t change the world in too weird a way.”

“You will be able to write an excellent story. I do not know what will happen yet, but that alone I do know.”

He sounded confident, so she could only accept it with her bitter smile.

“I suppose it will be amazing. After all, anything can happen there other than immortality.”

“Yes. You and I will be able to go anywhere in that world.”

Shinjou felt heat in her cheeks when he said that.

…*Why does he want to be with me so much?*

But that was something she could say too. She wanted to be with him forever.

“Well, yes. I want to be with you too, Sayama-kun.”

終わりのクロニクル

The two of them brought their smiling faces close and their lips met.

After a long time, the dampness parted and they looked at their clasped hands.

Georgius's light was just about to vanish.

And then it was gone.

So the two of them exchanged a nod but did not let go of each other's hand.

"Now, it is time to go."

They began to run with slight smiles on their lips. They ran at the same speed without letting go of each other.

At that moment, they heard a song from overhead.

It was a hymn coming from Noah.

Shinjou looked up, wondering who was singing it, but Sayama spoke next to her.

"Is Noah-kun singing?"

●

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah reached the concept creation facility with her broken body.

She looked around the area.

She could only see the surrounding light of the concepts.

That light proved the world was changing.

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah climbed the stairs to the bell tower.

○ **"Before" November 5, 1990**

She liked the ringing of the bell.

It made a unique sound that no one else could emulate and it also carried far into the distance.

○ **"Before" March 25, 1991**

Noah wanted to be *like that*.

○ **"Before" December 25, 1993**

One more thing was added to the creation facility: a bell.

The bell would indicate the completion of the concept creation. It would inform everyone that the world had changed.

This was something only Noah had.

She wanted to try ringing it right away.

This was hers alone. It was the physical proof of something only she could do.

○ **"Before" December 25, 1995**

Her creator spoke to her.

"Take care of the new world."

She was told to ring her bell.

○ **"Before" December 25, 1993**

She wanted to try ringing it right away.

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah looked around from the top of the bell tower.
She could only see the surrounding light of the concepts.
That light proved the world was changing.

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah knew the world was about to change.
She asked if that would mean she had created a new world.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1995**

Her creator spoke to her.
“Take care of the new world.”
She was told to ring her bell.

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah realized what it was she was meant to take care of.
She had not been told to take care of the creation of the new world; she had been told to take care of the new world itself.
“In that case…”

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah looked to the world that had to exist beyond the light. That world had gained the past and would continue to become new forevermore.
She realized that this here was the answer.

○ **December 25, 2005**

So Noah spoke.
“Thank you very much.”
Those were the first words she had physically spoken from her own lips.

○ **December 25, 2005**

Why had she not said “over”?
And where was that song in her memories?

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah found the song in her memories.
She opened her mouth and released a voice from deep in her throat.
It was a loud, loud voice.
She sang.

“Silent night, Holy night
“Shepherds first see the sight
“Told by angelic Alleluja,
“Sounding everywhere, both near and far
“ ‘Christ the savior is here’
“ ‘Christ the savior is here’ ”

○ **December 25, 2005**

Noah rang the bell.

○ **“Before” December 25, 1993**

Something only she could do.

○ **December 25, 2005**
Noah had accomplished that goal.
○ **December 25, 2005**
“This is 8th Arch-Model Automaton No. 0 of Concept Creation Facility Aerial Ship SSS-X0 Noah. I was restarted ten years ago and today…”
○ **December 25, 2005**
“I have completed the task left with me. Restarting my stopped clock and continuing to the next situation.”
○ **December 25, 2005**
“Over.”

●

As Sayama and Shinjou ran, they heard the ringing of a bell behind them.
The wall of the concept space was visible up ahead and everyone was waiting for them.
The others would not be able to see them from outside, but the automatons had to have detected them.
Izumo and Kazami, Hiba and Mikage, Heo and Harakawa, the others from Team Leviathan or UCAT, their schoolmates, and the members of other Gears were raising their hands.
“Sayama! Shinjou! Behind you! Behind you!!”
They already knew. Noah had exploded behind them.
The light grew stronger and approached from behind.
Sayama ran, but…
“Shinjou-kun.”
He squeezed her hand.
“Right, Sayama-kun.”
They believed they would make it in time.
And just then, Sayama saw something in the light around him. So did Shinjou.
“Eh?” They looked around to find a world filled with white light.
This was not the concept light from before. It was a much calmer light.
And they both saw several people there.
“Is that…?”
His grandfather stood next to an automaton.
His father was there wearing a lab coat.
Next to Noah were Shinjou’s…
“That’s my mom and dad…”
They were waving with a smile and they mouthed something.
“ ‘Go forth in lewdness.’ ”
“That is not what they said! They said to work hard.”
Shinjou then smiled toward her parents and they all nodded.
“Um, so was that dream of the afterlife I had real?”
“Should I grab that lecherous old man over there and start an interrogation?”

“Y-you don’t have to! Besides, you’d get caught in the blast and end up like them! Also…now that I think about it, the underworld and all that are only now going to be created, so maybe that really was just a dream.”

Sayama smiled bitterly at that.

“But Low-Gear had the negative concepts as the opposites of the other Gears’ positive ones. It also has the contradiction allowance concept. It is possible some kind of model version was created here.”

“Oh, no,” gasped Shinjou. “Th-that means I cried and said I didn’t want to be there in front of your mom. And I said I wanted to see you. Wh-what have I done?”

“Do not worry. If the underworld had become a banquet hall for that old monkey man and his friends, then you are much better off with me.”

“Y-you really can be mean to them…”

“There is nothing wrong with that,” he said.

A great many people were moving to the other side of the white light. Those residents of the past were traveling to the future.

Some of them turned back toward Sayama and Shinjou: Itaru and Sf, Chao, Hajji, and Shino. The blond young man may have been Alex.

Besides them, they saw the members of the National Defense Department, an old man riding a large mechanical dragon, a princess, a woman riding a white god of war, a giant black mechanical dragon, and a giant white mechanical dragon. Everyone who had been lost was there.

They all waved back and spoke their own words.

Then they turned their back to continue toward the empty whiteness.

“What is that?”

“A region of blank paper. That is the world’s genetic notebook in which everything we have done is written.”

Sayama explained and nodded as he looked into that vast emptiness.

…The two of us will continue on together and write more of the world.

“From now on, whether in this world, a much greater world, outer space, parallel worlds, or an evolving world, we and those who come after us will inherit what came before and continue on from there. And we will all fight alongside each other to move further ahead. We will always, always advance to the leading edge of the world. And while I am there, I know exactly who will be by my side.”

As he said that, he felt a squeeze on his hand as if in agreement.

So he ran. Instead of pulling on Shinjou’s hand, he held her hand as proof that she was with him and ran through the world at the same speed as her.

But the explosion was approaching from behind.

“————!!”

Just as they wondered if they would make it, they felt a push from behind.

“!?”

What had caused that sudden speed boost?

Sayama looked back and saw a woman standing there.

It was someone he had long misunderstood, it was someone who had protected him, and it was someone who had said she hoped he could do something someday.

Sayama called for that person.

“…!!”

She smiled and moved her lips.

She mouthed the words, “It’s okay. I understand.”

And, “You have someone to support you now, don’t you?”

So he and Shinjou nodded back toward the woman and spoke up as if merely leaving for school.

“Bye.”

As she watched them go, Sayama and Shinjou faced forward and passed through the wall.

They arrived where the others were.

And as they plunged into the new world, they gathered strength in their clasped hands.

“From now on, I will always be with you because you are right, Shinjou-kun.”

She gave a single answer.”

“Testament,” she said with a smile. “So will I.”

They squeezed each other’s hand.

“So will I! I’ll always be with you because you’re a villain!”

With those words, they had arrived home.

They had arrived in the original world that was filled with new cheers of joy.

●

A moment later, the concept space closed and the Leviathan Road ended.

Lights were seen around the world, it was called a miracle of the holy night, and most of Taka-Akita Academy’s students arrived home late at night to be scolded by their parents.

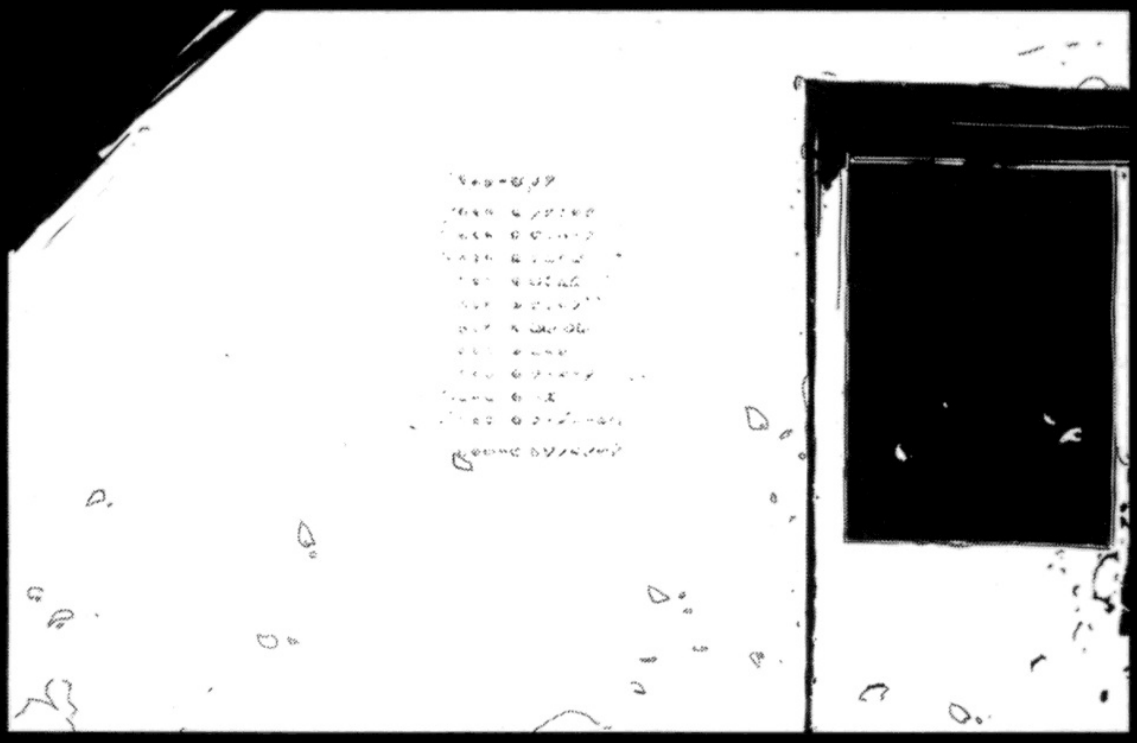
They were all returning to where they belonged.

To confirm the last traces of the holy night, they returned to those who would be with them and to the places they shared with those people.

And now the story returns to springtime two years later.

Final Chapter

“The Ending Chronicle”



I have realized it
So…

END

●

Two rows of cherry trees blossomed below the blue sky.

The road between the trees led to a cement wall surrounding a vast area of land. The open entrance on the western end was surrounded by stone gateposts engraved with the words “Taka-Akita Academy”.

A sign on the gate said classes were out for spring break and the gate itself was open with no one passing through it.

If one did pass through the gate, they would reach a central road also lined by cherry trees.

A faculty building was located directly ahead from the entrance and the second year general education building was located to the north of that. A single figure was visible there.

A young man in a suit stood on the second floor emergency staircase landing with a small boar-like animal on his head.

As he rested his elbows on the railing and looked out across the campus, the wind blew and cherry blossoms scattered.

Then the emergency exit behind him opened.

A woman in a white dress stepped out with a black binder in one hand.

●

The woman held her skirt down with the hand she held the binder in lest it blow too far up in the gentle wind.

“Wow, it’s pretty windy, Sayama-kun. Maybe I shouldn’t have worn a skirt.”

“Please do not suggest things that would kill my motivation, Shinjou-kun. Panty shots at school are a valuable thing.”

“I did wear a girl’s uniform a lot during our third year, you know?”

“It feels completely different with personal clothes.”

“Is that how it works?” asked Shinjou as she lined up next to Sayama.

When she viewed the blowing cherry blossoms below the blue sky, she realized she had seen this same scene in the past.

Today, Sayama had invited her to visit some graves, stop by some familiar places, and then go to UCAT.

The idea had likely started with an email from Izumo and Kazami: “We’ll be back for a bit, so if you have nothing better to do, we could keep you company.”

The message had only arrived one day in advance, so those two were the same as always.

The school was the first place Sayama had brought Shinjou.

…He hasn’t forgotten.

He then turned toward her and asked a question.

“How were things inside, Shinjou-kun?”

“Hm? …I think the interior’s changed a little. Also there was a painting from the art club and some photos in front of the Kinugasa Library. There was a

photo of the National Defense Department, of Old UCAT, of our parents, and…of us."

The photo of them was from two years ago when the student council went on a going-away trip for Izumo and Kazami.

They had gone to the mountains around Mt. Ikoma and found the spot at which their parents and the others had taken their photo.

"I never thought I would once more find myself standing in the same place as that lecherous old man after we finished all that. It was sad that I was not able to hang up any posters in the mountain cabin during that trip."

"You were supposed to be in charge of food, so you really need to stop making jokes where you open up your bag to reveal it's all goods modeled after me. Also…"

Shinjou pointed at the neighboring school building to change the subject.

Three people were walking along the hallway on the first floor.

"I passed by them earlier."

The one in the lead was a girl in a girl's uniform who had long black hair. She occasionally touched the red cloisonné pendant hanging from her neck as she showed the other two around the academy.

"She's apparently going to be the next student council president."

"Does this school have some kind of rule about the president being someone who repeated a year?"

The two walking behind her were a boy and a girl.

The girl wore personal clothing and held a cat. She also had a white IAI musical instrument case hanging from her shoulder.

The boy also in personal clothing seemed to know the girl and seemed confused why the girl and president were speaking like they knew each other.

"Do you think they will inherit what we left behind in this school?"

"I don't know. But did you hear what Ooshiro-san's been saying? Just like your grandfather, someone apparently had an orphanage made after the Great Kansai Earthquake."

"I certainly would not know anything about that."

Yes, you do, she thought, but she said something else instead.

"Whoever it was apparently gave it the strange named of the Hero House."

Sayama said nothing, so Shinjou said nothing more either.

But she seemed satisfied with that as she held her hair against the wind and leaned her back against the railing.

She looked to the wall in front of her.

"————?"

Perhaps due to the angle of the sun, she saw writing on the wall. Someone had used their finger to write in the sand and dust there.

There were twelve rows of writing and the middle ten were as follows:

1st-Gear: Fafnir Custom

2nd-Gear: Yamata

3rd-Gear: Typhon
4th-Gear: Mukiti
5th-Gear: Black Sun – White Creation
6th-Gear: Vritra
7th-Gear: Four Dragon Brothers
8th-Gear: Wanambi
9th-Gear: Zahhak
10th-Gear: Ragnarok

Those ten had faded a good bit, but the two rows above and below them were brand new, as if they had only just been written.

Above 10th was the following:

Top-Gear: Noah

And below 1st, the following words supported all the others:

Low-Gear: Leviathan

After seeing that writing, Shinjou slowly turned toward Sayama.

But he gave no explanation and simply looked back at her.

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing.”

His slight smile kept her from saying anything.

After all, his completion of those twelve lines meant something.

…His Leviathan Road has ended.

Two years had passed since it had ended. Being in this familiar place during the same season as its beginning may have helped him make up his mind about something.

She wondered what he would do now.

A sudden gust of wind reached them.

“——————!?”

The source of the wind was two objects passing by at extremely low altitude.

After kicking Sayama as he crouched down to peek up her fluttering skirt, she looked up and saw two forms there.

One was a blue and white mechanical dragon and the other was a black winged god of war.

As those two winds stretched high into the sky, they left behind the low sound of a sonic boom.

Down below, Sayama had pulled out a digital camera at some point.

“Are they training? Honestly, they still act like a biker gang or something. What are they thinking?”

“There’s a lot I’d like to say to you, but I’m guessing they’re all on their way to UCAT.”

“So were they showing off to us just now?”

He sounded exasperated and Shinjou fixed her hair while facing forward again.

But…

“What is it, Shinjou-kun?”

“Oh, nothing.”

The wind had completely blown away the writing on the wall.

Should she have given it a better look or was this for the best? She did not know.

“We should be going, too.”

He suddenly pulled on her hand.

He led her down the stairs and to the familiar space below.

“Wow.”

Cherry blossoms were scattering everywhere.

It felt so nostalgic even though they had been here as recently as a year ago.

“Over there is where you pulled down my track suit, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And you are wearing a skirt today.”

“You can’t,” she said while turning around to find him right there.

She realized anew that he was by her side and breathed a sigh of relief.

Perhaps due to being in such a familiar place, she recalled the fight that had begun during the spring two years before.

A lot had been lost, but they had definitely gained the past, a new future, and…

“The fact that you’ll be with me.”

They walked side by side toward the dormitories and they pressed against each other.

It was a strange thing. Two years before, she had never imagined this was where she would be now.

“We’re together, aren’t we?”

“You keep saying that, Shinjou-kun.”

Sayama also smiled as he looked around and then at her.

“Well, you do remember what I said when I picked up Gram, don’t you? I said I wanted to have you with me.”

She did remember. He had saved her life, so she had faced his true self, taken his hand, and…

“And I…and I said that I did too, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but that was not the first time I thought that. The first time was when I met you working so desperately hard in that Okutama forest.”

Suddenly, he faced her directly and cleared his throat.

“I have no proof from a writing concept, but I will still say it, Shinjou-kun. Although it is such a common thing I do not know if it has any meaning.”

“…Eh? What is this? Nothing weird, okay?”

She then heard his kind words.

“I love you, Shinjou-kun.”

He took a breath and more words reached her ears.

“I want to go out with you, Shinjou-kun. Because I want to be with you.”

He gave her a direct confession.

●

He confessed with no one else around.

This may have been one of his emotions he did not like showing people.

But it was so sudden that Shinjou did not know how to respond.

It felt like being hit by everything he had previously told her all at once.

She had thought saying “I love you” was a simple thing that one could easily say if they wanted to.

But he had only now said it after everything they had experienced together and it had come so suddenly.

…N-no fair…

Had he chosen today’s itinerary in order to say this?

Because he never spoke his innermost thoughts, she had gone out of her way to not say those words either.

And that left her flustered now that he had said them.

“S-so is this another one of those dynamite Sayama statements…or something?”

He responded quietly.

“Shinjou-kun… Please do not make light of this.”

She panicked when she noticed the weakness of his voice, his lowered eyebrows, and his hanging head.

…He’s serious.

“S-sorry.”

“Sorry!?”

His head shot up, as did Baku’s on top of his head.

“You mean! After everything we have been through! I am being rejected!?”

“W-wah! Th-that isn’t what I meant! It really isn’t! I wanted to say thank you because I feel the same way! I um…n-never want to leave you either!”

She breathed in and formed the words that her heart brought to her. She also grabbed both his hands.

“You’re the only one I want to spend the rest of my life with!! Because…”

She did her very best to shout the words she could only say if their hearts were connected.

“I love you too! I love you just as much as you do me!”

She breathed in and looked to him.

She was a little bothered by the chilly silence created by her breath.

“Um…”

…I said it.

Those words seemed to gather together and reset all of the previous expressions of her feelings.

She had said it not because Sayama had but because she had felt that was what she needed to say now.

By summing up her feelings, she felt like they could begin anew.

By gathering together all of the awkward words from the past, they could work their way toward even greater words in the future.

This was just a dividing line, designating a new beginning.

“I love you…so let’s be together, Sayama-kun.”

As they pressed their bodies and cheeks together, she saw a tear in the corner of his eye.

…Oh. Um…uh…

It was so sudden that she froze up, but then she heard a somewhat trembling breath.

“Thank goodness…”

He then embraced her, pulled her close, and gathered his strength.

She felt her heart warm at the fact that their hearts were connected by those words.

So she responded in kind. Without letting go, she clung to him and longingly embraced him.

Her binder had fallen to the ground, but she could pick it up later.

After she confirmed the presence in Sayama’s chest, she heard him inhale.

“I have someone to be by my side. And they will be there always.”

Her heart skipped a beat.

She had least seen this side of him when they had been reunited on Christmas Eve two years before.

Just like now, he had embraced her and she had embraced him back.

She realized this was the reverse side of his pain and it was something he had never let anyone see.

After confirming they would never be apart, he had allowed this to be seen only the one who supported his pain. He showed her just what feelings had existed behind the pain she had supported him through.

…What a complicated person.

She understood that only she could touch his heart now.

So she asked a soothing question while lightly patting his back.

“Were you lonely? Were you lonely after so many people left you behind for so long?”

He moved his head in a nod, so she nodded back.

“I was too. We’re opposites, but we were the same when it comes to that.”

She found her vision blurring, but she knew she had to respond to him.

She nodded again, moved her head back a bit, and blushed at how late it was to be discussing this.

“I never forgot that I was told someone was coming for me eleven years ago.”

“And I never forgot that I was told I was on my way to see someone precious.”

Then…

“We won’t be lonely anymore, will we?”

Their lips met. They seemed to be both desiring and answering each other. They seemed to be exchanging themselves.

But finally, they parted in satisfaction and exchanged heated breaths.

Shinjou held out her right hand and he held out his left.

He took and squeezed her hand, so she squeezed back.

They sensed each other's pulse, warmth, and dampness.

"I'm so happy."

She looked at him with a smile and found his usual expressionless look.

But she knew he was happy too.

The rings on their clasped hands gave a quiet clink.

She felt like their hands would never part again.

"So we'll be visiting the graves after this?"

"And then we can go see that forest in Okutama. We need to thank that werewolf that allowed us to meet. Then we can meet those idiots at UCAT and the two of us can discuss something on the way home."

"Discuss something?"

"Yes." He cleared his throat and averted his gaze. "About our future. …It has to do with your novels."

"Eh?" She was surprised. "D-do you mean you've decided what you're going to get serious about and what you're going to do for the world?"

He did not answer, but he did give a small smile of anticipation.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw that smile and he squeezed her hand again.

He had probably noticed the pulse, sweat, and heat on her hand.

The wind was blowing and it carried the spring cherry blossoms.

Those blossoms almost looked like snow. It reminded her of the snow and concept light from that night two years ago.

And behind them, she heard the piano playing in the school building's music room.

It played Silent Night.

That was the one song she had remembered and now she remembered so much more.

Still, she sang along with the song her mother had taught her and that connected her to someone precious.

As they walked hand-in-hand, Sayama also opened his mouth.

And they sang.

"——————"

As they sang, Shinjou suddenly realized something about the writing on the emergency exit wall.

"Was that…?"

The wind had wiped it clean, but that had chronicled the twelve worlds that had risen into the heights.

Those words of those various endings had vanished so no one could see them anymore.

That was the Ending Chronicle.

Everything that connected the past and the future was with them, so where would they end up as they continued on ahead?

She only knew two things for sure: Sayama was smiling her way, and…

“I will always be with you, Shinjou-kun.”

She nodded at his words.

“So will I.”

She raised her voice while squeezing his hand even tighter.

“So will I!”

The words of their promise rang into the sky of the new spring season.

Their voices rang loud with that song of promise in the background.

終わりのクロニクル

We'll always be together, Sayama-kun!!

Afterword

That was the final volume of Owari no Chronicle. It's thanks to all of you that I could do this for three years. Thank you very much.

And while this ends Owari, the Ahead series itself continues. Sayama, Shinjou and the others have finished the "Ending" that their ancestors left behind and they will now be creating a "Chronicle" of their own world, but the stage and focus of the story is not just on them. It is a story of the entire world growing livelier. I think the viewpoint will jump all around the world.

When the Ahead world is opened up again someday or the Chronicle summing it up is released, I hope you will want to know what has happened in this world.

In all seriousness, thank you so much for these three years. And with that, the usual chat.

"Today, I've invited in a special guest."

"C'mon, I'm no one special. I'm just a normal person. What kind of introduction was that?"

"Come to think of it, most people would probably understand you. …How does it feel to get thrown through the air by an elephant?"

"I thought I was going to ele-faint. …Didn't like that one? Then it felt ele-fantastic."

"I hope it throws you again and breaks your neck. Anyway, did you read it?"

"Of course I didn't. I checked the afterwords for 1-5, and didn't only one of them read it?"

"Yeah. 6 isn't out yet, but they didn't read it for that one either. In other words, you all are statistically the worst!"

"Shut up. Besides, your books take up too much space on the bookshelf! Oh ho ho ho ho. How about you go die!?"

"Don't you dare complain about that in the final volume of those books that take up so much space!"

"Also, you need to thank the readers who have bothered to stick with you. C'mon, bow down."

This was kind of all over the place for the last one, wasn't it? …Anyway, thank you very much, everyone. I'll do my very best to get a proper afterword for my next book.

I thought this volume's background music would be Silent Night, but I feel like that's more the background music for the series as a whole. Instead, I chose Soldier's Song from the video game Alien Soldier. I wasn't sure I should choose it since it's a Mega Drive game and nearly impossible to get your hands on, but these days you can download Sega's games (for a fee) and they're rereleasing it. It's strange how things from the past continue to live on in the present without deteriorating.

Anyway, I was listening to that while proofreading.

“Who was the most uneasy with themselves?”
I also thought about that.
Now then, now then. I’m currently trying to figure out where I’ll go next.

October 2005. A suddenly chilly morning

-Kawakami Minoru